# The Margins are in our Minds: The Earliest Capuchin Missions to the Ottoman Empire

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*This article offers a close reading of a collection of letters written by Capuchin missionaries in the Ottoman empire in the early seventeenth century. It does so with a view towards understanding how the early Capuchins reflected on their position in both local and global contexts. Rather than see these early Capuchin missions as operating 'in the margins' – whether by virtue of their presence in the world of Eastern Christianity, or by virtue of their distance from Rome or their own countries of origin – this article starts from a different perspective, that is, by situating these individuals at the heart of the Ottoman communities in which they established themselves. To this end, the article shows how Capuchin missionaries envisioned themselves as participating in a global religious order based in Brittany whilst they sought in their everyday lives to achieve proximity to Ottoman Christians and Muslims. In its attention to questions of distance, mobility and the specificity of place, the article contributes to recent attempts to reimagine the field of 'global Catholicism': where is the centre; where are the margins; and who decides which is which?*

In April 1632, Michel-Ange de Nantes received the news that he was to be sent to the Levant. From Brittany, he was to travel to Marseille and then onwards to Aleppo, where he would join the few Capuchin

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This article started life as a lecture given at the Ecclesiastical History Society's conference on 'Margins and Peripheries' in July 2023. I am grateful to Peter Marshall for the invitation, and to all those present for their insights and stimulating questions. In revising the lecture for publication, I benefitted enormously from the excellent comments provided to me by Bernard Heyberger, Fred Smith, and the two anonymous reviewers for Studies in Church History, and to Aurélien Girard for his assistance with a few specific queries in the final stages of publication. Finally, I am grateful to Peter Marshall and the editors of the journal for their kindness and support throughout this process.

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fathers who had already been living there for several years. Stopping in Paris, Michel-Ange de Nantes encountered rumours circulating about other Capuchins who had gone before him: it was said that some had failed to learn the local languages and had no choice but to return to France, while others in Rome had claimed that Capuchin missionaries had been unable to live in 'good conscience' abroad. Even the *Propaganda Fide*, the recently established office of the papacy tasked with responsibility for missions, had written to Père Joseph de Paris, director of the order, about news it had received that some Capuchins had allegedly converted to Islam. As he travelled, he continued to encounter other, different reports about the mission abroad, which some in Marseille described as being well-regarded by local communities in Aleppo, both Christian and Muslim. In this way, Michel-Ange de Nantes spent a hot, uncertain summer in Marseille, waiting three months for a ship, and finally departing on 8 September 1632, which happened to be the feast of the birth of the Virgin Mary.

If he felt trepidation during his journey, his concerns seem to have disappeared by the time of his arrival in Aleppo. In his first letter from Aleppo – written to Raphael de Nantes, the provincial, or head, of the order in Brittany – he described how impressed he was by what the Capuchins had already accomplished there. The rumours he had heard of the hardships faced by missionaries was wrong. Instead, he described the close, personal relations he had quickly developed himself with both local Christians and Muslims. He spent some three years studying Arabic and Armenian before deciding, in 1636, to leave Aleppo in hopes of establishing a Capuchin presence further east in Baghdad and Mosul. From 1637 to 1641, Michel-Ange focused his energies among the local communities in Baghdad, even becoming superior of the Capuchin household there. This too was a period of great success: in 1638, he wrote that he had received more alms from Ottoman subjects than he could ever obtain in France. During the day, he conversed with local notables and higher clergy, joined the laity in their daily devotions, and sometimes even offered medical advice to Christian and Muslim families. At night, he wrote letters that would make their way to France, inspiring and energizing other Capuchins, even Père Joseph, the head of the order, who passed his time reading stories of the conquests of Godefroy de Bouillon, leader of the First Crusade and the first ruler of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. It is unclear how much of his life Michel-Ange de Nantes spent in this way, before he travelled back at some point to Brittany, where he died in Auray in 1664.



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Almost all that we can know about Michel-Ange de Nantes relies on information taken from twenty-six letters he wrote over a period of some nine years spent in the Ottoman empire.[1] That these letters survive at all is down to some measure of luck. It was at some point after 1641 that Michel-Ange de Nantes's letters were recovered, copied and assembled into a single manuscript as part of a larger collection of letters written by Capuchins in the Ottoman empire. Little is known about the identity of the compiler, but what is clear is that the manuscript itself was sent, probably in 1648, to Marcellinus de Pise, a Capuchin of the province of Lyon, who had been collecting materials to use for his continuation of a history of the order that had been started earlier in the century. While Marcellinus's history was published in Lyon only in 1675, the letter book itself has somehow survived and is preserved today at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.[2] Comprising a total of 116 letters written by twenty-six Capuchins over a period stretching from 1626 to 1641, the collection offers an idiosyncratic window into the earliest Capuchin missions to the Ottoman empire. Some missionaries are much better represented than others. In contrast to the twenty-six letters written by Michel-Ange de Nantes, for example, we learn almost nothing from the collection about one of his companions, Charles-François d'Angers, whose presence can only be gleaned from occasional references to him made by Michel-Ange de Nantes. For others, such as Agathange de Vendôme, we do not possess a single letter in the collection, despite its being clear from other sources that Agathange de Vendôme had studied Arabic and conversed with locals for nearly a decade as he travelled from Jerusalem to Aleppo to Cairo, before his death in

[1] My account of the career of Michel-Ange de Nantes draws on the letters held in the manuscript under study in this article, namely MS NAF 10220, in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (full discussion below). On the reading of Godefroy de Bouillon, see Guillaume de Vaumas, 'L'activité missionnaire du Père Joseph de Paris', *Revue d'histoire des missions* 15 (1938), 336–59; his death in Auray is noted in Joseph Michel, 'Essai de répertoire des bretons partis dans les missions étrangères avant 1800' (PhD thesis, University of Rennes, 1946), which is an unpublished dissertation that I have been unable to consult directly. However, Marc-Antoine Alix drew on Michel's study for his MA dissertation, 'Missionnaires bretons dans les Nouveaux Mondes (XVIe – XVIIIe siècles)' (MA thesis, University of Rennes, 2017), see 166–7 for the relevant entry. I am very grateful to Aurélien Girard for drawing my attention to Alix's MA thesis.

[2] The manuscript is part of the Nouvelles acquisitions françaises (NAF) MS 10220, under the title 'Relations des missions des Capucins au Levant (1607–1641). XVIIe siècle', hereafter NAF 10220.



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Ethiopia in 1638.[3] Despite the echoes of his movements in the archives, Agathange's voice is absolutely silent in this letter book. This is a reminder of how little can ever be known about a category of individuals who spent much of their lives far from home, in oral conversations with the local societies in which they lived, and who rarely, if ever, published any works in print. In search of past lives spanning great distances, historians must depend on the haphazard survival of letters and other scraps of paper, all of them witnesses to the desires of the dead for connection to distant family, friends and others in the worlds they left behind.

## I. Introduction: Margins and Peripheries

Did these missionaries think of themselves as living 'on the margins' or 'at the peripheries'? This is an important question in as much as the everyday lives of missionaries play a central role in debates about the nature, global or otherwise, of early modern Catholicism. These debates have tended to revolve around rival ways of conceptualizing 'the making of Roman Catholicism as this planet's first world religion': Europe and the world, converters and the converted, or in the apt formulation by Simon Ditchfield, the 'papacy and the peoples'.[4] Whereas an earlier generation of scholarship took for granted a centre-periphery model in which Catholicism spread outwards from Rome to Africa, Asia and the Americas, recent approaches have sought to decentre our focus away from assumptions about the centrality of Rome in the making of global Catholicism. This work of 'decentering' has transformed our understanding of early modern Catholicism in important ways. Some scholars have emphasized the importance of new relationships that developed directly between different regions in this period and without any reference to Rome.[5] Others have challenged Eurocentric ideas of Christianity, emphasizing instead the dynamism of the Christian world beyond Latin Christendom, especially in the

[3] See, for example, Ladislas de Vannes, *Deux martyrs capucins, les bienheureux Agathange de Vendôme et Cassien de Nantes* (Paris, 1905).
[4] Simon Ditchfield, 'Decentering the Catholic Reformation: Papacy and Peoples in the Early Modern World', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 101 (2010), 186–208, at 207.
[5] See, for example, Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge, 2010); Gauvin A. Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773* (Toronto, 1999).



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Christian East.[6] In the most recent and transformative example of this approach, Simon Ditchfield has emphasized 'reciprocity' and the creativity that underlay the ways in which European forms of Catholicism 'were owned and adapted to local needs by the indigenous peoples of Asia, America, Africa, and parts of Europe itself'.[7] In place of traditional ideas of a 'global Catholicism' with its notional headquarters in Rome, therefore, scholars have proposed the importance of frameworks such as 'local religion', 'polycentric' Christianity, and even 'composite Catholicism' as ways of rethinking the place of geography in our understanding of early modern Catholicism.[8]

These approaches have coincided with a second set of transformations in the ways in which scholars have studied the history of the missions themselves. Where missionary orders, and their archives, were traditionally sifted for documentary sources about the societies they encountered, a more recent wave of scholarship has made missionaries themselves the subject of critical study. These approaches offer alternative ways of imagining the experience of missionaries. Christian Windler, for example, has shown how the work of missionaries in Persia was subject to competition between multiple Catholic actors, whether papal, national, or the orders themselves.[9] Similarly, Megan Armstong's study of the 'reinvention of Catholicism' in the Holy Land demonstrates how competition between different religious orders defies any simplistic ways of thinking about 'Catholic mission'

[6] Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme catholique (Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Rome, 1994); idem, *Middle Eastern and European Christianity, 16th–20th Century: Connected Histories. Essays by Bernard Heyberger*, ed. Aurélien Girard et al. (Edinburgh, 2023); Dorothea Weltecke, 'Space, Entanglement and Decentralisation: On How to Narrate the Transcultural History of Christianity (550 to 1350 CE)', in Nikolas Jaspert and Reinhold F. Glei, eds, *Locating Religions* (Leiden, 2016), 315–44; Samantha Kelly, *Translating Faith: Ethiopian Pilgrims in Renaissance Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 2024); John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'Connected Histories and Eastern Christianities', in Bruno Boute, Birgit Emich and Andreea Badea, eds, *Pathways through Early Modern Christianities* (Paderborn, 2023), 187–210.

[7] Ditchfield, 'Decentering the Catholic Reformation', 207; compare idem, 'Rome calling? Rewriting the Catholic Reformation for the 21st Century', in Matteo Al Kalak, Lorenzo Ferrari and Elena Fumagalli, eds, *La crisi della modernità. Storie riletture e revisioni per Gianvittorio Signorotto* (Rome, 2023), 305–28, at 306.

[8] These are some of the frameworks identified as 'pathways' to early modern Christianity in Boute, Emich and Badea, eds, *Pathways through Early Modern Christianities.*

[9] Christian Windler, *Missionaries in Persia: Cultural Diversity and Competing Norms in Global Catholicism* (London, 2024).



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as a unified, coherent set of aspirations.[10] In another recent approach to missions in Asia, one group of historians has focused on 'patterns of localization' as a way of recovering a sense of the place of missionaries in a defined set of contexts, for example in courts, cities, the countryside, and in their own households.[11] Taken together, these approaches have emphasized the importance of situating the analysis of missionaries firmly within the context of the local societies in which they were rooted, in some cases disconnected entirely from Rome.

Underlying both these fields – 'global Catholicism' and 'early modern missions' – are a set of assumptions rooted in how historians think about issues of distance in the early modern world. On the one hand, these works have shown how the circulation of information created a sense of simultaneity between communities dispersed around the world.[12] They have shown us how Europeans conflated geography, sometimes seeing in the missions to the Americas models for how to approach the 'other Indies' at home.[13] They have also challenged contemporary ideas about the expansion of Catholicism, emphasizing the spread of Catholicism as a granular process that took place at the level of individuals.[14] All of this is a testament to the fruitful ways in which scholars of early modern Catholicism have increasingly adapted the language of global history, especially the way global historians have engaged critically with the study of space, mobility and circulation.[15]

[10] Megan Armstrong, *The Holy Land and the Early Modern Reinvention of Catholicism* (Cambridge, 2021).

[11] See, most recently, Nadine Amsler et al., eds, *Catholic Missionaries in Early Modern Asia: Patterns of Localization* (London and New York, 2020); R. Po-Chia Hsia, *A Companion to Early Modern Catholic Global Missions* (Leiden, 2018), especially the introduction (1–14), at 8.

[12] Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization;* Markus Friedrich, *The Jesuits: A History* (Princeton, NJ, 2022). On communication and community in other contexts, see Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, CT, 2009); Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, CA, 2014); John-Paul A. Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford, 2013).

[13] Adriano Prosperi, '"Otras Indias": Missionari della Controriforma tra contadini e selvaggi', in *Scienze, credenze occulte, livelli di cultura: Convegno internazionale di studi (Firenze, 26–30 giugno 1980)* (Florence, 1982), 205–34.

[14] Karin Vélez, *The Miraculous Flying House of Loreto* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

[15] See, for example, Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), 16. More generally, see John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'Introduction: Seeing the World like a



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Yet, as Jeremy Adelman has argued, even global historians still have a good deal of work to do when it comes to thinking about the problem of distance in a critical and reflexive way.[16]

For missionaries far from home, being 'on the margins' was as much a state of mind as a lived reality. To this end, this article applies the insights of global history to help us rethink how global Catholicism was lived and experienced by missionaries, particularly in relation to this volume's focus on margins and peripheries. It does so through the close study of a collection of letters written by Capuchins during the order's earliest presence in the Ottoman empire. The focus on this book of letters allows us to recover a sense of the different ways in which a single missionary order reflected on its position in local, Ottoman and global contexts. In what follows, I emphasize the significance of these reflections as windows into both individual and collective forms of belonging as they intersected within a single community: the Capuchins of the province of Brittany. Members of a global religious order, but also individuals resident in local Ottoman societies, their reflections on distance do not map easily onto the frameworks generally used to understand early modern Catholicism, whether centre-periphery or local-global. Instead, this article argues that an emphasis on geography distracts us from more important aspects of the missionary experience, namely the specificity with which Catholic orders regarded particular societies and places in the early modern world. Within the global theatre of Catholic missions, the Ottoman empire offered a unique stage.

In emphasizing the specificity of the Capuchin experience in the Ottoman empire, I build here on a generation of scholarship that has transformed our understanding of the ways in which the work of Catholic missions in the Christian East was distinct from that of missions in Africa, Asia and the Americas. This was implicit in the earliest handbooks written for the instruction of missionaries such as that of the Discalced Carmelite Thomas á Jesu (1564–1627), which contained a special chapter for missionaries travelling to the East that circulated widely among the Capuchins.[17] The distinctiveness of the

Microhistorian', in idem, ed., *Global History and Microhistory*, issue supplement 14, *P&P* 242 (2019), 1–22, as well as the other contributions in that volume.

[16] Jeremy Adelman, 'The Problem of Distance', in Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds, *Rethinking Global History* (Cambridge, 2024), 210–34.

[17] Thomas á Jesu, *De procuranda salute omnium gentium* (Antwerp, 1613), 346–512 (ch. 7, on the 'oriental' churches).



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Ottoman empire was also present in the basic, but vexing, question about how to 'convert' Eastern Christians, a problem that would generate much debate in later decades.[18] At the same time, it has long been clear that generic categories like 'Eastern Christianity' are deeply problematic: in 2003, Bernard Heyberger was already cautioning against the dangers of treating Eastern Christian confessions as fixed and stable, emphasizing instead the dynamic and connected histories of different communities of Christians across the Ottoman empire.[19] All of this should serve as a warning against too easily incorporating the Ottoman empire into debates about 'global Catholic missions', at least not without giving sufficient attention to the ways in which contemporaries regarded it as being distinct in space and time from other societies where Catholic missionaries travelled in this period.

What follows in this article, therefore, is the study of a group of Capuchins from Brittany who were dispersed across a constellation of places, all of them different from one another even as they shared the status of being part of the political world of the Ottoman empire. Rather than see these early Capuchin missions as operating 'on the margins' – whether by virtue of their presence in the world of Eastern Christianity, or by virtue of their distance from Rome or their own countries of origin – this article starts from a different perspective, that is, by situating these individuals at the heart of the Ottoman communities in which they established themselves. Neither 'local' nor 'global', the early Capuchin missionaries thought about their own position in the Ottoman empire in three main ways. First, I show how the circulation of letters between Capuchins facilitated their participation in a global order organized around the Capuchin province of Brittany. Next, I argue that, within this order, the Capuchins developed a distinct sense of the specificity of their presence within the Ottoman empire. This specificity was not defined in a geographic sense, or as a function of distance, but rather by the unique circumstances of religious diversity they faced in the Ottoman empire and, in particular, in terms of their aspirations to achieve proximity to Ottoman Christian communities. Finally, in the last section of this article, I explore

[18] For an excellent study of this process, see Cesare Santus, *Trasgressioni necessarie. Communicatio in sacris, coesistenza e conflitti tra le comunità Cristiane orientali* (Rome, 2021).

[19] Bernard Heyberger, 'Pour une "histoire croisée" de l'occidentalisation et de la confessionnalisation chez les chrétiens du Proche-Orient', *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 2 (2003), 36–49; Ghobrial, 'Connected Histories and Eastern Christianities', 187–8.



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how the specificity of their work in the Ottoman empire played itself out in everyday life as the Capuchins sought to become closer to the societies in which they lived. Seeing global Catholicism through the eyes of someone like Michel-Ange de Nantes, we can understand how the everyday work of 'global Catholicism' could enable a missionary in the Ottoman empire to feel as though they were at the centre of Christianity despite the great distance – thousands of kilometres, between Brittany and Aleppo – that separated them from home.

## II. Brittany in Aleppo: A Global Capuchin Order

The main materials for this study survive today in a single manuscript located at the Bibliothèque nationale de France under the shelfmark NAF 10220.[20] There is no indication of who copied and compiled these letters into a single manuscript. A note scribbled onto the first folio of the manuscript indicates only that the 'book of letters and relations' had been sent from the 'superior of the province of Brittany to R. P. Marcellin' for the purpose of the 'composition of his annals of the mission'.[21] Other annotations in the manuscript include reference to the dispatch of specific copies of letters that had been 'sent to R. P. Marcellin de Pise in 1648', all of which suggests that the letter book had come into the possession of Marcellinus de Pise, a Capuchin of the province of Lyon, at some point in the 1640s.[22] Little more can be known about the larger context surrounding Marcellinus's writing of a history of the order. Given the focus of the manuscript on letters written by Capuchins from Brittany – almost all the letters are addressed to Raphael de Nantes, Capuchin provincial of Brittany in the 1630s – it may be that his history was intended to celebrate the contributions of the province to the order's success in the Ottoman empire. At any rate, it appears that Marcellinus de Pise's history was only published decades after the manuscript itself had been returned to Brittany.[23]

[20] The original letters on which Marcellinus de Pise's copy is based may or may not survive today, but this article refers only to NAF 10220 itself. It appears that a later copy of the letters was completed in the nineteenth century: this is MS 1533, which can be found today in the Bibliothèque franciscaine des Capucins, Paris. A cursory review of the contents of MS 1533 suggests it to be a faithful copy of NAF MS 10220.

[21] Paris, BN, NAF 10220, inside cover.

[22] BN, NAF 10220, fols 350, 461.

[23] BN, NAF 10220, inside cover, suggests the manuscript was returned at some point to the provincial of Brittany. For the earlier history of the order, see Giovanni Boveri,



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Representing a foundational moment in the Capuchin mission to the Ottoman empire, the manuscript includes some 116 letters by twenty-six individual missionaries written from fifteen different locations in the Ottoman empire including, in order of frequency: Aleppo, Sidon, Satalie (Antalya), Cairo, Tripoli, Beirut, Mosul, Constantinople, and Baghdad. Table 1 details the names of all the missionaries represented in the collection as well as the number of surviving letters and general dates covered by the letters. Table 2 contains information of all the locations of the letters. In addition, the manuscript contains copies of several important documents related to the Capuchin missions in the East, for example, early charters and instructions related to the founding of the mission in the Levant in 1625 under the leadership of Père Joseph (François Leclerc du Tremblay, 1577–1638).[24] Moreover, a 'table des lettres et relations' at the beginning of the manuscript flags twenty-four letters as being of particular importance ('les plus notables'); however, further study would be needed to establish whether there is any relationship between these letters – they were written by different authors and from different locations – or why the compiler thought they deserved to be singled out in this way in the table of contents. Whilst all the letters appear to be written in the same hand, there are also a number of marginal annotations that are written in Arabic, which correspond to Arabic terms transcribed in the letters; and in one case there is also a copy of an entire letter in Arabic.[25] All of this suggests that whoever compiled the manuscript had access to the original letters as sent from the Ottoman empire, and they must have possessed at least rudimentary abilities in writing Arabic or had help from someone who did.

While the presence of Catholic missions in the Middle East dated back to the medieval Franciscan presence in the Holy Land, the beginning of the seventeenth century witnessed the arrival of new orders in the wake of the establishment of the Sacred Congregation of the *Propaganda Fide* in 1622. In addition to the reinvigoration of

*Annalium seu Sacrarum historiarum ordinis Minorum S. Francisci qui Capucini nuncupantur*, 2 vols (Lyons, 1632–9); the continuation by Marcellinus de Pise was published in *Annalium seu Sacrarum historiarum ordinis Minorum S. Francisci, qui Capucini nuncupantur* (Lyon, 1676), later translated into Italian as *Annali de' Frati Minori Capuccini composti dal padre Marcellino da Mascon e tradotti in volgare dal P.F. Antonio Olgiati da Como*, 3 vols (Trent, 1708–14).

[24] Benoist Pierre, *Le père Joseph. L'Éminence grise de Richelieu* (Paris, 2007).

[25] See, for example, BN, NAF 10220, 596–7.



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**Table 1.** The Capuchin Letters in NAF 10220

| Name of Capuchin | Number of letters | Locations | Period covered |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adrien de La Brosse | 4 | Beirut | August 1628 – February 1629 |
| Agathange de Morlaix | 4 | Cairo, Jerusalem | January 1640 – November 1640 |
| Albert de Nantes | 1 | Aleppo | November 1629 |
| Alexis de Lamballe | 14 | Sidon, Satalie | December 1626 – May 1641 |
| Blaise de Nantes | 2 | Isfahan | February – July 1640 |
| Bonaventure du Lude | 2 | Aleppo | January 1634 – December 1639 |
| Brice de Rennes | 9 | Tripoli, Beirut | February 1637 – August 1641 |
| Cassien de Nantes | 2 | Cairo | March – November 1634 |
| Cesarée de Roscoff | 4 | Cairo, Rennes | November 1630 – March 1632 |
| Charles de Nantes | 3 | Aleppo | November 1638 – January 1639 |
| Ephrem de Nevers | 1 | Basra | September 1639 |
| Etienne de Châtellerault | 2 | Babylon | December 1637 – October 1638 |
| Felicien de Rennes | 9 | Satalie, Constantinople | March 1638 – February 1640 |
| Gabriel d'Alençon | 3 | Tripoli, Beirut | March 1630 – October 1639 |
| Gilles de Loches | 4 | Sidon, Cairo | March 1628 – December 1630 |
| Guillaume de Beaufort | 3 | Sidon | December 1638 – September 1640 |
| Jean-Chrysostome d'Angers | 1 | Aleppo | June 1631 |
| Martial de Thorigny | 2 | Aleppo | September 1639 – January 1641 |
| Michel-Ange de Nantes | 26 | Paris, Marseille, Aleppo, Baghdad, Mosul | April 1632 – August 1641 |
| Michel de Rennes | 11 | Aleppo, Sidon, Damascus, Satalie, Beirut, Tripoli, Rome | January 1634 – June 1641 |

(*Continued*)



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**Table 1** *Continued*

| Name of Capuchin | Number of letters | Locations | Period covered |
|---|---|---|---|
| Philémon de Saint-Benoît | 2 | Sidon | August 1633 – December 1634 |
| Pierre de Guingamp | 2 | Nicosia | October 1637 – March 1640 |
| Pierre de Morlaix | 3 | Cairo | May 1639 – December 1640 |
| René de Nantes | 1 | Sidon | November 1641 |
| Thomas de Saint-Calais | 1 | Sidon | November 1626 |
| Toussaint de Landerneau | 1 | Isfahan | April 1634 |

Catholicism in the Holy Land, the seventeenth century also witnessed increased competition between different religious orders over who would have jurisdiction over specific locations in the Ottoman empire.[26] In the early 1620s, a handful of Jesuits could already be found in Constantinople, Syria and Mediterranean islands including Cyprus, whilst Discalced Carmelites and Augustinians had been dispatched mainly to Isfahan and other locations in Safavid Iran.[27] In the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, the Capuchins became more present from the early seventeenth century, especially in the period that followed the mission of the Friar Minor Tommaso Obicini di Novara, who served as a papal emissary to a synod with the Church of the East held in Diyarbakir in 1616.[28]

[26] See, for instance, Armstrong, *The Holy Land and the Early Modern Reinvention of Catholicism*; Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*; Windler, *Missionaries in Persia.*

[27] Charles A. Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire, 1453–1923* (Cambridge, 1983); H. Chick, *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia: The Safavids and the Papal Mission of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, 2nd edn (London, 2011; first publ. 1939); John M. Flannery, *The Mission of the Portuguese Augustinians to Persia and Beyond (1602–1747)* (Leiden, 2013).

[28] The synod is described in Pietro Strozzi, *Synodalia Chaldaeorum, videlicet Epistola synodica Eliae patriarchae Babylonis, archiepiscoporum eius obedientiae, …* (Rome, 1617). For a bio-bibliographical sketch of Tommaso Obicini, see Claudio Balzaretti, 'Un importante ma dimenticato orientalista del sec. XVII: Tommaso Obicini da Novara o.f.m.', *Novarien* 19 (1989), 49–70; idem, 'Padre Tommaso Obicini: Un mediatore nel vicino Oriente all'inizio del Seicento', *Novarien* 32 (2003), 183–90.



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**Table 2.** The Composition of Letters in NAF 10220

| Location | Number of letters composed | Period covered |
|---|---|---|
| Aleppo | 18 | June 1631 – January 1641 |
| Babylon | 2 | December 1637 – October 1638 |
| Baghdad | 4 | August 1637 – August 1641 |
| Basra | 1 | September 1639 |
| Beirut | 9 | August 1628 – January 1641 |
| Cairo | 12 | November 1630 – December 1640 |
| Constantinople | 4 | August 1638 – January 1640 |
| Damascus | 1 | December 1637 |
| Isfahan | 2 | April 1634 – February 1640 |
| Jerusalem | 1 | June 1640 |
| Marseille | 2 | June – July 1632 |
| Mosul | 9 | March 1638 – July 1640 |
| Nicosia | 2 | October 1637 |
| Paris | 1 | April 1632 |
| Rennes | 1 | March 1640 |
| Rome | 1 | June 1641 |
| Satalie (Antalya) | 13 | March 1638 – October 1640 |
| Sidon | 18 | November 1626 – November 1641 |
| Tripoli | 10 | March 1630 – August 1641 |
| Unidentified | 5 | January 1639 – June 1641 |

Seen within this larger context, the letters collected in NAF 10220 provide only a small window into a much longer history of Catholic missions in the Ottoman empire. They are not witnesses to the earliest presence of Capuchins.[29] Nor should they be seen as offering a complete account even of the short period during which the letters were composed, since they were assembled, and therefore curated, by the anonymous compiler in Brittany. Moreover, the letters provide a distorting impression if we try to read them as signs of any 'permanent' Capuchin presence in a given location. With the exception of a couple of Capuchin households established in key centres like Aleppo and Sidon, the presence of a missionary in any given location was not necessarily sustained over a long

[29] The earliest letters from Sidon, Aleppo and Beirut date to 1627, 1627 and 1629, whereas Heyberger has identified the first presence of Capuchins at earlier dates: 1625, 1623 and 1626 respectively: see Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 275.



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period of time. This was the case for example with Mosul: the town witnessed the arrival of the first Capuchins in 1638, but they had left by 1641, after which the order ceased to maintain a permanent presence in the city again until the 1660s.[30] The impression of ubiquity painted by the list of locations in Table 2 is also misleading in that the actual number of missionaries at any one place in time rarely exceeded a couple of individuals; sometimes there may have been more if we take into account the possibility of missionaries travelling through a location. Individual Capuchins were themselves sometimes ignorant of the presence nearby of other members of their order, and in some cases they seem unaware even of previous Capuchin missions in the places where they were.[31] Unlike modern historians who can build a complete picture of the missions retrospectively through the gathering of archival sources, individual missionaries could be entirely in the dark when it came to their position relative to other missionaries in both space and time. This is a reminder that episodes of exchange between Catholicism and Eastern Christianity were never sequential and cumulative in the tidy way often imagined by twentieth-century church historians.

NAF 10220 quickly complicates any ideas of the triumphant spread of global Catholic missions. Instead, we find a tentative process through which a very small number of individuals – dispersed across a vast, changing set of locations – managed to establish permanent missionary households in only a few locations. This may explain the acute sense of solitude, loneliness and isolation we find repeatedly in the earliest letters of the Capuchins: not only the quiet solitude of living by oneself, or the unpredictability of travelling alone, but also the all-consuming worry and fear about the fate of friends who were themselves living and travelling on their own. Writing from Tripoli in 1640, Brice de Rennes noted that he 'was alone most of the time, on account of the small number of clerics we are here'.[32] On the same day,

[30] Michel-Ange de Nantes writes about these challenges in his letters from Mosul from May to July 1640: BN, NAF 10220, with letters starting on 474, 483, 501.

[31] In the letters describing a Capuchin visit to the patriarch of the Church of the East in 1640, no reference was made to the earlier synod that had been held between the Capuchin Tommaso Obicini and the Church of the East in Diyarbakir in 1616: BN, NAF 10220, 22 May 1640, 474.

[32] BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 14 March 1640 (Tripoli), 441. References to specific quotations include an indication of the author, date, location of writing (where known), and relevant page number of the letter as contained in the manuscript's modern pagination.



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less than fifty miles away in Beirut, another missionary confessed that he was contemplating leaving the mission and returning to France. He did not want to do so, but felt that he could not persevere any longer without the company of others: 'It is a pity to be all on one's own as a cleric in such situations of great risk.'[33] Frequent news of the deaths of other missionaries would only reinforce these feelings of isolation. After describing a sickness from which he was slowly recovering, Brice de Rennes wrote in 1640:

> It displeases me that being alone here as I am without any companions, I am unable to carry out my work. Father Gabriel has left me here alone so that he can travel to assist Father Pierre de Guingamp, who is himself alone in Cyprus. I have received news that Father Felicien de Rennes has died at Satalie [Antalya] three days after his return from Constantinople, thereby leaving Father Alexis de Lamballe alone now at Satalie, and this after he had spent six months on his own without being able to confess to anyone while Father Felicien was away in Constantinople. Your Reverence can see from this the sadness and chagrin that remains for a poor cleric who is all alone.[34]

Rather than seeing this automatically as a sign of their being on the margins, we should also consider other reasons that explain the frequency of such comments by missionaries, for example the way in which everyday life in the mission must have challenged individuals who had chosen to live life under a rule, that is, within a community. How could they remain faithful to this vow when isolated in conditions that were so far from the communal modes around which the order was organized in western France? However, not all individuals felt the same way. Writing from Beirut in February 1629, Adrien de La Brosse wrote that if he ever felt he was living as a Friar Minor, 'it is here and now', and he claimed never to have thought, even once, of returning to France.[35]

Reflections on isolation must also be seen as part of a larger missionary rhetoric aimed at recruiting more missionaries to assist with the work required in the Ottoman empire. Writing from Sidon in December 1638, Guillaume de Beaufort requested the dispatch of more missionaries: 'Above all, take care to choose healthy men,

[33] BN, NAF 10220, Michel de Rennes, 13 March 1640 (Beirut), 438.
[34] BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 20 April 1640 (Tripoli), 457.
[35] BN, NAF 10220, Adrien de La Brosse, 8 February 1629 (Beirut), 90.



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because even with those who have only ordinary illnesses in the province, when they arrive in this country, these illnesses will increase, especially the headaches'.[36] Another missionary, writing from Tripoli in 1640, was more specific:

> It seems to me that it would be preferable either to leave our [current] locations in order to be together in groups of at least two, or to abandon the missions entirely, because being here alone means we cannot travel to preach neither to the countryside nor to the city. Instead, one acts as a sort of chaplain to two or three Franks [European Christians], something which I think is better suited to the Observants than ourselves. They tell us continually that they are chaplains for the French, and I respond to them that I did not come here to preach to anyone other than local [Ottoman] Christians.[37]

Beyond the question of numbers, the letters also expressed a preference for the skills and talents needed for the work of mission. Apart from obvious considerations like the need for people who could learn languages effectively, there was an acute demand for more manual labour and technical skills. Writing from Mosul in 1638, Michel de Rennes reiterated a previous request for more friars:

> We ask for help in the form of four missionaries and two lay friars … . The friars should be young clerics, fervent and humble, who will live in poverty. You would do us a great deed if they could be taught bloodletting, and if they could be introduced to some carpenters to teach them how to work. Over here they have no idea what a door or window is. The friars will also need to bring tools with them from France, because they do not have [good ones here] and they only use axes for all of their projects.[38]

The assumption was that the presence of more friars would contribute to the making of a well-functioning household, thereby freeing up the missionaries to focus entirely on engaging with local communities. Not only does such rhetoric reflect the genuine practical needs of everyday life, but it is an important reminder of the extent to which

[36] BN, NAF 10220, Guillaume de Beaufort, 10 December 1638 (Sidon), 333.
[37] BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 20 April 1640 (Tripoli), 457–8.
[38] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 8 April 1638 (Mosul), 209; for similar comments on the need for skills and manual labour, see BN, NAF 10220, 446.



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these letters were also intended to contribute to fundraising efforts among patrons and donors in France.[39]

Far from communicating a sense of being on the margins, the letters suggest the extent to which individual missionaries imagined themselves as participating in a much wider global order of Capuchins, one that had its heart in Brittany. On the most basic level, this is because the great majority of Capuchins studied in this article actually came from one of two provinces of the order, namely Brittany and Touraine, both of which in 1641 were still under the supervision of a single provincial, Raphael de Nantes.[40] The shared origins of the missionaries are also clear in the epithets used in the naming practices of those who joined the order, for example, the appellation of 'de Nantes' for six of them: Albert de Nantes, Blaise de Nantes, Cassien de Nantes, Charles de Nantes, Michel-Ange de Nantes and René de Nantes. In some cases, they even came from the same families. By the late seventeenth century, specific locations in the Ottoman empire had effectively been 'twinned' with one or another of the two provinces. Writing in 1684, a Capuchin publishing under the pseudonym Michel Febvre explained that missionaries originally from Touraine tended to be dispatched to Cyprus, Aleppo, Cairo, Diyarbakir, Mosul and Baghdad, while those from Brittany were based mainly in Damascus, Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Mount Lebanon.[41] Moreover, a close reading of the letters makes clear that in addition to maintaining a correspondence between Brittany and the Ottoman empire, Capuchins living in the Ottoman empire also regularly exchanged letters with one another.

If they retained a close link to Brittany, and to one another, the early Capuchins also envisioned themselves as part of a global Capuchin network extending across North Africa, the Caribbean and the

[39] See, for example, the general circulars composed by Michel-Ange de Nantes addressed to 'the Capuchins of Brittany': in French, 9 January 1634 (Aleppo), 153; in Italian, 9 January 1634 (Aleppo), 659.

[40] Raphael de Nantes served as the first provincial of Brittany for over a decade, elected several times in succession from as early as 1629, in which capacity he received letters from the province's missionaries from around the world. He was also the author of *L'Exaltation de la sacré couronne de nostre seigneur et les SS. Practiques des serviteurs de Jesus par le P. Raphael de Nantes Capucin* (Rennes, 1638).

[41] Michel Febvre, *Théâtre de la Turquie: ou sont representées les choses les plus remarquables qui sy passent aujourd'huy touchant les mœurs, le gouvernement, les coûtumes & la religion des Turces, & de treize autres sortews de nations qui habitent dans l'Empire Ottoman* (Paris, 1682), 515.



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Americas. The letters show Capuchins in the Ottoman empire occasionally comparing their own experiences with those of friends based in Morocco, Canada and Guinea. Writing from Sidon in 1626, for example, Gilles de Loches thanked God that he was being treated better by the locals than his counterparts who had gone to Morocco in 1624.[42] In 1636, another missionary wrote from Aleppo to ask Raphael de Nantes whether he could send him any news of whether 'there are Capuchins of our province in Canada' and of those who had travelled to Guinea 'what good have they accomplished, have they returned, and if so from which Guinea (because there are two)'.[43] In return for this news, he reassured Raphael de Nantes that 'all our missionaries in Persia, Egypt, and Palestine are well.' In this way, the early Capuchin missions were constituted by a group of individuals who shared a common origin in as much as they came from the same region in western France, and in some cases, even from the same families.[44] A more refined prosopography could help better understand the proximity of individual Capuchins to one another, but what is clear here is the sense that through the work of the Capuchins, Brittany had itself been transplanted into the Ottoman empire.

## III. A 'Babylon of Confusion': The Specificity of the Ottoman World

Across the great distance that separated Brittany and Aleppo, a global order of epistolary communication worked against any sense of being on the margins of Christendom. Yet this impression of simultaneity should not be confused with the idea that the experience of Capuchins in the Ottoman empire resembled that of Capuchins living in other parts of the world. Instead, the Capuchins themselves quickly developed a sense of the specificity of their circumstances in the Ottoman empire. Unlike in Morocco, for example, where their counterparts lived among Muslim communities, the Capuchins in the Ottoman empire focused their missionary work mainly on local Christian

[42] BN, NAF 10220, Gilles de Loches, 1 December 1626 (Sidon), 69. On the Capuchin mission in Morocco, see Apollinaire de Valence, ed., *L'histoire de la mission des pères capucins de la province de Touraine à Maroc par le P. François d'Angers (1624–1636)* (Rome, 1888).
[43] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 2 October 1634 (Aleppo), 202.
[44] This was the case, for example, with Albert de Nantes and Raphael de Nantes who were brothers.



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communities. Ottoman Christians constituted a patchwork of communities of different languages, theologies and liturgical traditions, in which one of the few characteristics they shared in common was their legal status as *dhimmīs*, or non-Muslim subjects, of the Ottoman sultan. Some of these Christian communities, such as the Copts, traced their origins back to the apostolic missions of the early Christian church; others celebrated their distinctiveness, for example, the Maronites who wrote with pride of their history of close ties to Rome going back to earlier centuries.[45] In specific locations, missionaries encountered these 'Eastern Christianities' alongside the other communities with which they lived: Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'i, but also Yazidis, Druze and Jewish communities. Beyond their distinct confessional identities, Christian and non-Christian communities alike inhabited a complex linguistic world in which Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Greek, Armenian, Kurdish and Aramaic were spoken across the collective locations of the Capuchins.

Even in their earliest despatches, therefore, the Capuchins invoked the twin themes of 'disorder' and 'Babylon' as a way of characterizing the religious diversity they encountered in the Ottoman empire. When Michel Febvre described the Ottoman empire as a 'true Babylon of confusion', for example, he identified some fourteen different sects he had encountered: six Muslim (Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Turcoman, Yezidis and the Druze), six Christian (Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, Nestorians, Maronites and Copts), Jews, and a final sect that he designated as 'sunworshippers' ('solaires ou chamsi', for Arabic *shamsī*).[46] Febvre's categories conflate linguistic and confessional identity, but Capuchins also saw these differences expressed in physical ways. As Gilles de Loches described in 1628 in Sidon, 'some people are completely white, others are entirely black, and some are olive-coloured'.[47] The impression of disorder was also rooted in the observations the Capuchins made of everyday devotions and practices, especially the blurring of confessional boundaries that they witnessed in the use of shared rituals and sacred spaces. Writing from Beirut in 1628, Adrien de La Brosse admitted that he found it difficult to

[45] Sam Kennerley, *Rome and the Maronites in the Renaissance and Reformation: The Formation of Religious Identity in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (London, 2022).
[46] Febvre, *Théâtre de la Turquie*, 345.
[47] BN, NAF 10220, Gilles de Loches, 20 March 1628 (Saida), 77; see also his wider comments in the same letter on different species of animals and plants.



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'distinguish between different sorts [of people] here, because of the great familiarity that exists between Christians and Turks.'[48] There are various ways of understanding these comments. On the one hand, such reactions might reflect the simple fact that missionaries could not always understand local customs. On the other hand, it also reveals something of the genuine mixing of different confessions and religions that took place in the Ottoman empire, especially in the 'everyday religion' that James Grehan has identified in agrarian societies far from the imperial capital of Istanbul.[49] Whatever the case, it is clear that the Capuchins used these observations to construct ideas of the religious and cultural specificity of individual locations within the wider Babylon in which they found themselves. An example of this can be seen in the way in which Gilles de Loches described several locations in the region around Beirut in 1628:

> There are the Raphadins who are of the religion of the Persians … . They are a very superstitious people who do not want either to drink or to dine with anyone who is not of their faith. These people comprise some seven or eight hundred villages in this country, and they are very difficult to convert despite the fact that they have more affection for the French than any other nation … . We also have Turkmen … in the mountains and the plains. These people are docile and speak the Turkish language … . Moreover, there are the Arabs who have their own law and who live always in the countryside. These groups of infidels, or Muslims, are separate from the Jews and the Christians, of whom only the Maronites are Catholic. In Sidon, there are mostly Greeks, small numbers of Armenians, and a handful of Maronites. But in Damascus, Tripoli, and Jerusalem, you will find Abyssinians, Copts, Jacobites, and Nestorians.[50]

Moreover, distinctions made about specific localities developed in tandem with the crystallization of ideas about specific communities. By 1627, the Druze were assumed to have 'no religion'; by 1634, the Mandeans were regarded simply as Christians who preserved a particular devotion for John the Baptist; and in 1640, Michel-Ange de

[48] BN, NAF 10220, Adrien de La Brosse, 25 August 1628 (Beirut), 79.
[49] James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford, 2016); for an older tradition of such work, see F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford, 1929).
[50] BN, NAF 10220, Gilles de Loches, 20 March 1628 (Beirut), 75–7.



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Nantes could write that the Nestorians, one of the Christian communities in the region around Baghdad, were the 'least liked' by other Ottoman Christians.[51] In some cases, it is very striking how quickly an individual might develop such views. Only four months after his arrival in Sidon in 1627, Thomas de Saint-Calais could write optimistically that 'Having arrived in this country, I find a completely new world, which I have never seen before … nowhere near as diabolical as [I] thought. If liberty is given [to us], we will convert the whole country in no time'.[52] These views also contributed to strategic assessments about which locations were better suited for the presence of Capuchin missions. In 1637, Etienne de Châtellerault criticized the focus of the Capuchins on Ottoman cities like Aleppo, arguing instead that smaller towns like Mardin, Diyarbakir and Urfa were a better destination for new missions. Not only were there more Christians residing in such towns, but the people living there were 'very docile' and open to evangelism.[53]

It is striking that the letters exchanged between Capuchins differs in tone from the writings that Capuchin writers composed for audiences outside the order. Where NAF 10220 suggests an attention to the specificity of the Ottoman empire, letters composed for non-Capuchin audiences, at least in this letter book, fold Ottoman distinctiveness into a more generic rhetoric about disputation between Christianity and Islam. In the few letters in the collection that were sent to the *Propaganda Fide*, for example, Capuchins made much of the time they spent engaged in theological disputations with Ottoman Christians and Muslims. Consider one account sent by Michel de Rennes to Rome in June 1641, which described the conversations he had held with a Muslim *qadi*, or judge, visiting from Cyprus. As Michel de Rennes told the story, the *qadi* had been so moved by their conversations that before returning to Cyprus he had asked him for a copy of an Arabic Gospel because he had 'lived as a Christian in his

[51] On the Druze having 'no religion', see BN, NAF 10220, Gilles de Loches, 3 November 1627 (Sidon), 70; on the Mandeans, see Bonaventure du Lude, 23 December 1639 (Aleppo), 389; and on the Nestorians, see the reference to their being prohibited from entering the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in Michel-Ange de Nantes, 8 July 1640 (Mosul), 483. Compare, on the Druze, Bernard Heyberger, 'Peuples "sans loi, sans foi, ni prêtre": druzes et nusayrîs de Syrie découverts par les missionnaires catholiques (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles)', in idem and Rémy Madinier, eds, *L'Islam des marges. Mission chrétienne et espaces périphériques du monde musulman XVIe–XXe siècles* (Paris, 2011), 45–80.

[52] BN, NAF 10220, Thomas de Saint-Calais, 3 November 1627 (Sidon), 70.

[53] BN, NAF 10220, Etienne de Châtellerault, 1 December 1637 (Babylon), 228, and more generally his account of his journey to Mardin in the same letter.



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heart' ('il demeura chrestien en son coeur'). After returning to Cyprus, the *qadi* began to preach publicly about the superiority of the Gospels, at which point he was imprisoned under the trumped-up charge of having gone mad. Given a chance to redeem himself eight days later, the *qadi* was released, only to be later found proclaiming in front of an assembled crowd that Christianity was superior to Islam. The crowd set upon and killed him. The message of Michel de Rennes's letter was clear enough to readers in Rome: the efforts of the Capuchins had inspired a Muslim convert to sacrifice his life for Christianity in a way that recalled a much longer tradition of Christian polemics about Islam.[54]

This polemical interest in disputation was also suggested in works that were printed and published by Capuchin authors. An example from a later period is a book first published in Latin by the *Propaganda Fide*, entitled *The Book comprising Answers of the People of the Holy Catholic Universal Apostolic Church to the Objections of the Muslims, Jews and Heretics who oppose the Catholics.*[55] Written by Michele Febvre, the author who, as discussed above, had invoked the imagery of a 'Babylon of confusion', the book was subsequently translated into Arabic and Armenian. The topics in the book were aimed to assist in the refutation of Muslims, Jews and especially Eastern Christians. Judging from the small size of the book, some have suggested it was intended to support the everyday work of the Capuchins; however, as Feras Krimsti has argued, it would have been unthinkable to travel around the Ottoman empire carrying such a potentially inflammatory work written in Arabic.[56]

[54] The anecdote is taken from chapter 3 of 'Une breve relation faicte par F. Michel de Rennes … contenant les choses remarquables … qu'il a presenté aux SCPF', in BN, NAF 10220, Michel de Rennes, 13 June 1641 (n.pl., but probably Tripoli), 548–56, with reference to the *qadi*'s conversion 'in his heart' on 548–9. For a similar example, published in 1589 in Italian and German, see Charlotte Methuen, '"And our Muḥammad goes with the Archangel Gabriel to Choir": Sixteenth-Century German Accounts of Life under the Turks', in eadem, Andrew Spicer and John Wolffe, eds, *Christianity and Religious Plurality*, SCH 51 (Woodbridge, 2015), 166–80, at 166–88.

[55] Michel Febvre, *Praecipuae Objectiones quad virgo solent fieri per modum interrogationis a Mahumeticae legos sectoribus, Judaeis, et haereticis Orientalibus adversus catholicos earumque solutiones* (Rome, 1679). On the author, see Bernard Heyberger, 'Justinien de Neuvy, dit Michel Febvre', in David Thomas and John Chesworth, eds, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, 9: *Western and Southern Europe (1600–1700)* (Leiden, 2017), 579–88; and idem, 'Polemic Dialogues between Christians and Muslims in the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55 (2012), 495–516.

[56] The Arabic translation of the book appears to survive in only two printed copies, neither of which are held in any library or archive in the Middle East. Feras Krimsti, 'A Refutation of Muslims, Jews, and "Heretical" Christians, printed in



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Tales of martyrdom and refutations of Islam: these sorts of works appear at first to reinforce a sense of the Capuchins occupying an ambiguous and timeless space on the frontiers between Christendom and the Islamic world. However, one must be cautious not to use such sources as a window into the experience of Capuchin missionaries in this period. Unlike the letters under study, these sources were not written by and for the Capuchins. Instead, they offer a glimpse into what wider Catholic audiences wanted to hear from the Capuchins, and they cannot provide a useful indication of their actual undertakings on the ground. To understand the Capuchins' attitudes to the specificity of the Ottoman empire, we need to turn instead to the critical work of reading the letters for what they reveal about how the Capuchins viewed their own positions within local Ottoman societies.

## IV. Proximity and Distance in Everyday Life

NAF 10220 is a testament to the main activities that the early Capuchins focused on in the Ottoman empire. Most individuals spent their time in three main ways: the study of local languages, chief among them Arabic; the translation of devotional works into local languages and, to a lesser extent, the composition of new, original works; and the daily participation in the everyday lives and religious devotions of Eastern Christian communities. Taken together, these three activities all shared a common goal, namely to reduce the distance between Capuchins and the societies in which they lived.

Most missionaries began to study local languages only after their arrival in the Ottoman empire.[57] Decades later, this would become a point of derision among later writers, most notably Eusèbe Renaudot, the French theologian and orientalist who, in 1701, wrote a fierce critique of the Capuchins as part of a treatise submitted to the papacy on the limited progress made in the spread of Catholicism in the Ottoman empire.[58] Nonetheless, there is already in these early

Arabic', *Blog der Forschungsbibliothek Gotha*, University of Erfurt (5 October 2022), online at: <https://blog-fbg.uni-erfurt.de/2022/10/a-refutation-of-muslims-jews-and-heretical-christians-printed-in-arabic-a-catholic-missionary-at-work-in-17th-century-aleppo/>, accessed 5 December 2024.

[57] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 19 April 1632 (Paris), 113.

[58] The treatise is part of a manuscript containing a wide selection of Renaudot's writings: 'Collection de mémoires sur les liturgies des églises orientales et de documents relatifs aux



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missions clear evidence of an engagement with the study of Ottoman languages, especially Arabic.[59] As Adrien de La Brosse wrote in 1629, knowledge of Arabic, in particular, was highly valued among Ottoman Christians and also important from a practical perspective: 'It is necessary to learn it, and speak it, because we are most of the time without any interpreters.'[60] Written Arabic also offered a way of bypassing the patchwork of colloquial languages spoken in the region, which La Brosse had described in the same letter as 'extremely difficult Moorish languages, different from both Turkish and Arabic'.[61] Less clear are the methods the Capuchins used for studying Arabic. Requests were occasionally made for the dispatch of grammars and lexica that had been published in Europe, although it is unclear whether any of these requests were ever fulfilled.[62] However, surviving evidence suggests that, very early on, the Capuchins began to develop their own study materials such as the 'dictionary of vulgar [that is, colloquial spoken] Arabic' that Albert de Nantes was reported to have completed in Beirut as early as 1629.[63] Moreover, there was a cumulative and collaborative aspect to language study: a missionary who knew a language could teach it to one who had just arrived, an approach that was effective in the case of Arabic, but less so for languages studied by only one or two individuals, for example Syriac and Armenian.[64]

affaires diplomatiques et religieuses de la seconde moitié du règne de Louis XIV, formée par l'abbe Eusèbe Renaudot', in BN, NAF 7468, 368–98.

[59] For some examples of reference to the study of Arabic, see BN, NAF 10220, letters starting at 90, 184, 305.

[60] BN, NAF 10220, Adrien de La Brosse, 25 August 1628 (Beirut), 78–9; see also the reference to the study of Arabic by Agathange de Vendôme in: BN, NAF 10220, Adrien de La Brosse, 25 November 1629 (Beirut), 93.

[61] BN, NAF 10220, Adrien de La Brosse, 25 August 1628 (Beirut), 78–9.

[62] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 12 May 1633 (Aleppo), 133. In the same letter, reference is also made to an Armenian grammar and dictionary printed in Milan. For an Ethiopic New Testament, see BN, NAF 10220, Gilles de Loches, 1 March 1629 (Sidon), 91. For other requests for books, see BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 15 January 1641 (Beirut), 521; for the specific request for the dispatch of 'Arabic, Latin, or Italian books of Christian doctrine that are to be found in Paris' to be used 'for the instruction of children', see BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 25 April 1641 (Tripoli), 527.

[63] BN, NAF 10220, Adrien de La Brosse, 25 November 1629 (Beirut), 93. Many such works known by the authors of earlier studies are difficult to locate today, for example, those referenced in Louis de Gonzague, *Les anciens missionnaires Capucins de Syrie et leurs écrits apostoliques de langue arabe* (Assisi, 1932).

[64] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 12 May 1633 (Aleppo), 133.



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The emphasis on language study in the letters should not distract us from the fact that, then as now, some people simply picked up languages more easily than others. Shortly after his arrival in Tripoli in July 1636, Brice de Rennes described how he had impressed Ottoman Christians by the progress he had already made in both Arabic and Turkish. By his account, he had learned enough Arabic in five months to be able to give as good a sermon in Arabic as in French. That was because, in his words, 'I've received a God-given grace for languages, which is why I am not at all surprised [by my progress].'[65] Others were apparently less blessed: in 1632, Jean-Chrysostome d'Angers was forced to return to France after having spent three years in Aleppo trying to learn Arabic, but with no success.[66]

Most importantly, the study of Arabic provided Capuchins with an opportunity to become closer to local communities by receiving language instruction directly from Ottoman Christians. It is difficult to know much about these local teachers, most of whom are not identified by name in the correspondence. However, in those cases where it is possible to identify them, it becomes clear that the Capuchins often studied Arabic with individuals whom other sources show to have had reputations in their own communities as celebrated scholars and prolific copyists. This was the case even for the gifted Brice de Rennes who, it appears, studied Arabic with Yuhanna al-Ghurayr, a Syrian Orthodox priest and later bishop of Damascus, who was responsible for composing over fifty manuscript works.[67] While scholars such as Aurélien Girard and Giovanni Pizzorusso have transformed our understanding of the consolidation of a linguistic register of missionary and Catholic Arabic, further work still remains to understand the place of language study in cultivating personal ties between Capuchins and Ottoman Christians and Muslims.[68]

[65] BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 13 February 1637 (Tripoli), 259.
[66] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 19 April 1632 (Paris), 113; the study of Karshuni is described in BN, NAF 10220, Etienne de Châtellerault, 8 October 1638 (Babylon), 305; on the printing of Armenian, see BN, NAF 10220, Blaise de Nantes, 25 February 1640 (Isfahan), 432.
[67] Jean Fathi, 'Ibn al-Ghurayr', in David Thomas and John A. Chesworth, eds, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, 10: *Ottoman and Safavid Empires (1600–1700)* (Leiden, 2017), 299–307; and idem, 'Yūḥannā ibn al-Ghurayr, passeur de la tradition syriaque et arabe chrétienne au XVIIe siècle', *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 68 (2016), 81–209.
[68] Aurélien Girard, 'Teaching and Learning Arabic in Early Modern Rome: Shaping a Missionary Language', in Jan Loop, Alastair Hamilton and Charles Burnett, eds, *The*



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A second main focus of the daily lives of Capuchins involved the copying, translation and composition of Arabic texts, again often in collaboration with local Ottoman Christians. These unique works tend to survive today, if at all, only in small numbers of manuscript copies in church libraries and monastic collections in the Middle East, many of which are not easily accessible to scholars. However, a recent series of ground-breaking digitization projects has unearthed an entire corpus of manuscripts still in need of systematic study. In NAF 10220, it is possible to identify several categories of works that caught the attention of the earliest Capuchins. These included: sacred texts, for example the Gospels, the New Testament, and in time, the Psalter; spiritual works, normally translations of European Catholic Reformation writers; pastoral works, including catechisms; polemical works; and linguistic works, including grammars and dictionaries. Although these activities gained real momentum only in the second half of the seventeenth century, it is clear that by 1640, Capuchins were already occupied with the translation and composition of texts, and that these activities were being carried out at several different locations across the Ottoman empire.[69] One reason for this was that translation was an activity that could be carried out virtually anywhere. While travelling on the caravan from Aleppo to Baghdad, for example, Juste de Beauvais was reported to have completed an Arabic translation of Richelieu's catechism. Such efforts also reflected the usefulness of having manuscripts to offer as gifts to local notables. On the same journey, Juste de Beauvais presented some Armenian priests in Urfa with a copy of a translation of Bellarmine's catechism into Arabic that he had completed while travelling.[70]

As with other mobile communities of Catholics in this period, the work of translation afforded Capuchins a way of reducing the distance between themselves and the worlds they had left behind.[71] In some cases, missionaries selected works for translation that reflected

*Teaching and Learning of Arabic in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2017), 189–212; Giovanni Pizzorusso, *Propaganda Fide*, 1: *La congregazione pontificia e la giurisdizione sulle missioni* (Rome, 2022).

[69] For references to translation, see BN, NAF 10220, letters starting at 78, 217, 437, 474, 483, among others.

[70] BN, NAF 10220, Etienne de Châtellerault, 1 December 1637 (Babylon), 232; the Armenian priests in Urfa are on 225.

[71] See, for example, Frederick E. Smith, *Transnational Catholicism in Tudor England: Mobility, Exile, and Counter-Reformation, 1530–1580* (Oxford, 2022); Liesbeth Corens, *Confessional Mobility and English Catholics in Counter-Reformation Europe* (Oxford, 2019).



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perfectly the reforming spirit of early modern Catholicism in Rome. This was the case, for example, with a three-volume abridgement of the *Annales Ecclesisastici*, the triumphant history of the church written in the sixteenth century by Cesare Baronio. The *Annales* offered a history of the church from the establishment of Christianity at the start of the first millennium until the present. Brice de Rennes had started working on an Arabic translation while living in Damascus in 1644, and he completed the work with the help of local scribes, including a man whom he identifies only as a deacon named Yusuf ('Yusuf Shammās').[72] Brice spent six years working on the translation before he travelled to Rome in 1650, where he published the first two volumes of the work. He returned to Syria in 1655, where he continued his work on a third and final volume.[73] Originally written in Rome in the sixteenth century, rendered a hundred years later into Arabic in Damascus, printed on the *Propaganda Fide* press in Rome, and circulated in physical copies back to the Ottoman empire, the three volumes comprise over 1,000 pages in total, yet Brice de Rennes's Arabic translation still lacks any systematic, critical study.[74]

The act of translating Baronius into Arabic captures something important about the ambitions of the early Capuchins, but it would be misleading to characterize the significance of such works as being primarily scholarly or even evangelical. Rather, the act of collaborative translation afforded Capuchins with an opportunity for daily conversations and personal interactions with Ottoman Christians. The correspondence provides us with countless examples of how capacious these forms of participation could be, from attempts to treat the medical needs of Ottoman subjects, to engaging in local business transactions, to education of the local youth. Chief among these was an activity referred to throughout the letters by the term 'preaching' (*prêcher*). The term is used to describe those situations in which the

[72] The reference to Yusuf can be found in the preface to volume 1 of *Analu. Ecclesiasticor. Caesaris Baronii S.R.E. Card. Arabic Epitome* (Rome, 1653).

[73] On the popularity of the work among Eastern Christians in later decades, see John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'Catholic Confessional Literature in the Christian East? A View from Rome, Diyarbakir, and Mount Lebanon, ca. 1674', in Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu, eds, *Entangled Confessionalizations? Dialogic Perspectives on the Politics of Piety and Community Building in the Ottoman Empire, 15th–18th Centuries* (Piscataway, NJ, 2022), 383–99.

[74] The only modern study is Andrea Trentini, 'Baronio arabo: vicende e tematiche dell'*Annalium Ecclesiasticorum Arabica Epitome*', in Luigi Gulia, ed., *Baronio e le sue fonti (Atti del convegno internazionale di Studi Sora 10–13 ottobre 2007)* (Sora, 2009), 719–42.



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Capuchins sought to evangelize Ottoman Christians through sermons, lessons and participation in liturgical services. Writing from Tripoli in February 1637, for example, Brice de Rennes offered a moving account of the first time he 'preached' in the presence of some three hundred Christians. This appears to have involved him reciting the Our Father in Arabic, which incited the tears of those around him: 'They came to me afterwards and kissed my hand, saying what I had preached was like a pearl'.[75] Some months later, further east near Mardin, Juste de Beauvais preached to a village of Syrian Orthodox Christians. Etienne de Châtellerault described the experience in the following way:

> Father Juste preached in Arabic, and after he had finished, the entire crowd came to him to kiss his hands. Whether he liked it or not, he accepted it, which is why I permitted it as well. They called him 'Abona Emoutran' [Arabic, *abūna* and *mutrān*, a combination of the titles used to address priests and bishops, respectively], which in our language means 'Our Father the Bishop'. As for me, they called me 'Abona Elcacia' [Arabic, *qasīs*, meaning priest], which in our language signifies 'Our Father the Priest'. We spent our entire visit to this village in possession of these marks of distinction ('avec ces qualités').[76]

Clearly, this reference to preaching refers to an official permission obtained from higher clergy which allowed the Capuchins to preach in the churches of Eastern Christian communities. In 1637, Michel-Ange de Nantes provided a fascinating account of how his companion, Juste de Beauvais, had used one such permission to insinuate himself into the local Maronite community in Aleppo. This was how one missionary described Juste de Beauvais's entrance into the church:

> Having received the letter from the Patriarch giving him permission to preach, Father Juste went one Sunday to the Maronite church and had the Patriarch's letter read out loud. After it was read, he told the assembled crowd in a loud voice in Arabic that if there was anyone from among their priests or deacons who did not agree to our Fathers preaching in their church, in contravention to what had been expressed by their Patriarch, then he would not do anything contrary to their wishes. He went even further, saying that if there was anyone at all in

[75] BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 13 February 1637 (Tripoli), 259.
[76] BN, NAF 10220, Etienne de Châtellerault, 1 December 1637 (Babylon), 224.



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> their community – if even just one woman – who did not want them to preach in their church, he would not do so … . There were four priests present of whom two had been persuaded by other clerics to try and prevent our Fathers from preaching, but they did not dare to oppose us publicly and formally [in such circumstances]. All the common people declared loudly that they wanted us to preach, so Father Juste left, having agreed all of these arrangements.[77]

On this basis, the Capuchins continued to preach at weekly services for the Maronites in Aleppo. One can only speculate what local priests made of this brazen behaviour, but as Michel-Ange de Nantes noted with glee in another letter, 'no one dared challenge the authority of their patriarch in this regard'.[78]

At the same time, references to preaching should be understood as a sort of shorthand for a wide spectrum of forms of participation that the Capuchins used to make themselves omnipresent in the devotional lives of Ottoman Christians. They attended local liturgies; they were present at local funerals; they even sought opportunities to live in the residences of the higher clergy.[79] Writing from Aleppo in January 1634, Michel de Rennes described how he had gradually established himself as the confessor to one of the bishops of Aleppo whilst he continued to study Arabic: he hoped, thereby, to give 'some of the first rudiments of our faith to many people, both the notables and the lowly'.[80] This strategy also applied to the laity, with whom marks of 'good affection' were frequently reported.[81] Michel-Ange de Nantes summed up the situation well when he wrote from Mosul in 1638 that 'These people hold us in such high affection that they want us to bless their houses and they stop us on the road to take us into their houses. … We move with much ease among them'.[82]

[77] BN, NAF 10220, Etienne de Châtellerault, 1 December 1637 (Babylon), 231.
[78] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes and Charles François d'Angers, 28 March 1638 (Mosul), 281.
[79] See, for example, Michel-Ange de Nantes's description of the 'good affection' he had developed with them in his letter dated 24 January 1633 (Aleppo), 123. Some months later, Michel-Ange de Nantes wrote of his desire to travel and 'reside' with the Armenian patriarch in Mesopotamia: BN, NAF 10220, 12 May 1633 (Aleppo), 133.
[80] BN, NAF 10220, Michel de Rennes, 15 January 1634 (Aleppo), 185.
[81] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 24 January 1633 (Mosul), 123.
[82] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes and Charles François d'Angers, 28 March 1638 (Mosul), 290.



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In the areas of language study, the production of manuscripts, and everyday devotions, therefore, the Capuchins' efforts were aimed at achieving a single goal: the cultivation of personal relationships with and above all proximity to Ottoman Christians. This desire for proximity was also a function of the fact that the missionaries relied – in a material sense – on local communities for financial resources, political support, access to markets, and even for the provision of buildings and accommodation in which to live. Christian Windler has shown, for a different context, the extent to which Carmelites relied on local economies for a good portion of their livelihood.[83] Although we lack the sort of account books that would provide such a level of detail for the early Capuchins, the theme of their reliance on charity is an oft-repeated topic in the correspondence. Writing from Babylon in 1638, for example, Etienne de Châtellerault shared with Raphael de Nantes in Brittany the stories that were circulating about Juste de Beauvais, one of the earliest missionaries to establish himself in Baghdad in 1628. He was reputed to have spent an entire year living with the poor, begging for alms, and relying on the charity of Ottoman Christians and even the local Ottoman pasha.[84] Ten years later, another missionary, Gabriel d'Alençon in Beirut, would still write, with admiration, that the mission in Baghdad continued to depend entirely on alms.[85] Not only a reflection of local realities, these claims also made for effective rhetoric in the circulars that were regularly sent across Europe to raise funds for the Capuchins from Catholic patrons.

The dependence on local communities extended even to a reliance on political support from Ottoman officials and local elites. Because the political fortunes of such notables could change rapidly, the early Capuchins experienced a distinct form of precarity that exposed them to local intrigues, factionalism, and the complicated relations that linked provinces back to the imperial capital in Istanbul. The earliest Capuchins to arrive in Beirut, for example, had quickly endeared themselves with Fakhr al-Din al-Maani, the local Druze emir of Mount Lebanon. However, all this changed in 1633 when Fakhr al-Din was arrested under suspicion of planning a rebellion against

[83] Windler, *Missionaries in Persia*, 235–51.
[84] BN, NAF 10220, Etienne de Châtellerault, 8 October 1638 (Babylon), 306–8, for a fascinating biographical sketch of Juste de Beauvais's arrival in Baghdad.
[85] BN, NAF 10220, Gabriel d'Alençon, 2 October 1639 (Beirut), 377.



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the Ottoman state.[86] It would take years for those seen as allies of Fakhr al-Din to recover from his fall from grace, including the Capuchins, some of whom had also been arrested and transferred with him to Istanbul. Likewise, the correspondence is full of countless stories of the complicated challenges that faced the early Capuchins when it came to navigating local politics. Importantly, these political circumstances differed from one location to another, meaning that accumulating local knowledge in one place did not necessarily translate into progress in another. Far from the courtly rhythms of the imperial capital in Istanbul, the learning curve for Capuchins in this period was very steep indeed.

This precarity may explain why so little reference to the topic of conversion is made in NAF 10220. The word itself is rarely used by any of the letter-writers; nor do the letters contain the regular reports of numbers of converts that one finds, for example, among the writings of Carmelites in this period.[87] In some ways, this silence may reflect the extent to which the early Capuchins struggled to make sense of what exactly it meant to convert people who were, ostensibly, already Christians. Here the correspondence suggests a mix of the facile and the confused, at any rate certainly nothing that can be identified as a coherent Capuchin 'approach' to conversion. Some missionaries in this period imagined a sort of top-down conversion of Ottoman Christians. Michel-Ange de Nantes wrote in 1635 that:

> if we win a Patriarch, and his clerics, then we win all the people who are submitted to him, because each church having its own bishop in this country, new bishops are only made from their clergy [who are already submitted to them]. If we win the youth, we win everything.[88]

Others reported initial success in developing good relationships with local Christians, but they wondered where to go from there. Writing from Tripoli in 1640, Gabriel d'Alençon reflected on these challenges: having described the 'good affection' he had developed with the Syrian Orthodox community in Tripoli, many of whom affirmed that they

[86] See, for example, the references to the Druze emir in BN, NAF 10220, letters at 109, 111, 139, 142, 197 and 437. Several biographies of Fakhr al-Din are available in Arabic; for an introduction in French, see Michel Chebli, *Fakhreddine II Maan, prince du Liban (1572–1635)* (Beirut, 1984).

[87] Bernard Heyberger, 'Les chrétiens d'Alep (Syrie) à travers les récits des conversions des missionnaires Carmes Déchaux (1657–1681)', *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome* 100–1 (1988), 461–99.

[88] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes, 10 March 1635 (Aleppo), 203–4.



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accepted the supremacy of the pope, he wrote to Raphael de Nantes for further advice on what he should do next.

> I want to know your advice on the matter. Are they obliged to leave their sect, or can they receive the sacraments of their priests while acknowledging nonetheless the sovereignty of the Roman Pontiff and all that is believed and taught by the Roman Church? And must we absolve as heretics those who come to us and say that they have never had any differences between us and them?[89]

These anxieties point to the early signs of a set of doubts and questions that would develop decades later into what Cesare Santus has demonstrated to be full-fledged debates about *communicatio in sacris*, that is, the participation of Catholic converts in the rituals and ceremonies of their traditionalist communities.[90]

Beyond conversion, very little attention was given to the subject of church union, which would become an important priority in later Catholic missions to Eastern Christianity. In some ways, this is unsurprising given that the Capuchins, unlike the Jesuits, were not known for their contributions to theological debate or their knowledge of church history. Instead, the correspondence shows that Capuchins focused their efforts mainly on persuading the higher clergy to accept the authority of the pope in Rome.[91] Writing from Tripoli in 1640, Gabriel d'Alençon reported that he had met with the Greeks and Syrian Orthodox who had agreed to recognize the pope as 'the sovereign pontiff', even if there were some who, although accepting the pope, wished to remain 'in their own sect'.[92] Likewise, the few accounts of meetings between Capuchins and the patriarchs of specific Christian communities tend to focus either on local matters – for example, obtaining permission to preach – or on the authority of the pope, but rarely on securing 'professions of faith' that would confirm the patriarch's conformity with Roman doctrine.[93] Above all, the reluctance to

[89] BN, NAF 10220, Gabriel d'Alençon, 11 March 1640 (Tripoli), 434.
[90] Santus, *Trasgressioni necessarie*; Christian Windler, 'Ambiguous Belongings: How Catholic Missionaries in Persia and the Roman Curia dealt with *Communicatio in Sacris*', in R. Po-chia Hsia, ed., *A Companion to the Early Modern Catholic Global Missions* (Leiden, 2020), 205–34.
[91] BN, NAF 10220, Brice de Rennes, 14 March 1640 (Tripoli), 441.
[92] BN, NAF 10220, Gabriel d'Alençon, 11 March 1640 (Tripoli), 434.
[93] Marie-Hélène Blanchet and Frédéric Gabriel, *L'union à l'épreuve du formulaire. Professions de foi entre églises d'Orient et d'Occident (XIIIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Leuven, 2016).



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engage with issues of union reflected the reality that doing so risked alienating the Capuchins from the very communities to which they were trying to gain access. This awareness created the possibility for disagreements to emerge between the activities of the early Capuchins and expectations placed on them by the *Propaganda Fide*. In March 1638, the Capuchins in Mosul received instructions from Rome encouraging Juste de Beauvais to travel to Rabban Hormizd, the seat of the patriarchate of the Church of the East, in order to persuade the Nestorians to agree to a union with Rome.[94] Juste de Beauvais preferred instead to remain in Baghdad as his companions tried to explain to *Propaganda* officials in Rome:

> We have taken the view that to effect a union, it is more important to know them [the Nestorians], to win their friendship and thereby to render them more open ['plus facile'] to the idea [of union]. Otherwise, if those who have never met us and who do not know us well find that we speak immediately about union, we will be pushed away rather than advanced [in our work].[95]

In other words, the very act of bringing Eastern Christians closer to Rome risked being counter-productive: it could result in the Capuchins' being pushed to the margins of the local societies in which they lived. This may be why some missionaries in this period looked for less explicit ways to facilitate the conformity of Eastern Christians with Roman doctrine, for example through the translation of Roman canon law into Arabic.[96]

## V. Conclusion

Standing in Europe, it is rather easy to be taken in by the story of a global, triumphant Catholicism that drew the margins of the world into a centre of gravity based around Rome. However, listening to the voices of Capuchins in the letters they sent to one another, one is forced to wonder: where is the centre; where are the margins; and

[94] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes and Charles François d'Angers, 28 March 1638 (Mosul), 282.
[95] Ibid.
[96] For the example of the Discalced Carmelite Johannes Petrus a Matre Dei, see Herman G. B. Teule, 'The Shining Lamp: An Arabic Florilegium of Conciliar Texts', in Emiliano Fiori and Bishara Ebeid, eds, *Florilegia Syriaca: Mapping a Knowledge-Organizing Practice in the Syriac World* (Leiden, 2023), 365–80.



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indeed, who decides which is which? This article has suggested that traditional models of centres and peripheries – constructed around as yet unrefined ideas of geography and distance – are not suitable for recovering the actual experience of mobility as lived by Capuchins in the earliest years of their mission to the Ottoman empire. Through epistolary communication, individual Capuchins felt themselves part of a global order based in Brittany even whilst they focused their daily lives on finding a place at the centre of Ottoman Christian communities. No matter where they were in the Ottoman empire, they developed a distinct sense of the specificity of place. This was also, we must remember, only one of several competing views of what mission should look like in the Ottoman empire, nor is it a foregone conclusion that other orders would act in the same way, be they Franciscans, Jesuits or Carmelites. Whatever the case, modern historians need to incorporate ideas of specificity more effectively into our understandings of the shape, scale and places of 'global Catholicism'. When we do so, we may well find that the margins are in our minds, if they are there at all.

Perhaps the greatest sign of the confidence the early Capuchins felt in their place in the world comes from some of the last letters in the collection. Writing from Mosul in 1640, Michel-Ange de Nantes reports an encounter with a local priest whom he had met on the road. The priest asked him:

> To what end do you seek to persuade our Patriarch of your lies? … . Why are you trying to seduce us away from our religion and obedience to our patriarch in order to impose on us the law and religion of the Franks? Truly, you act in this way as if we do not already have our own shepherds and bishops to look after our salvation.[97]

Months later, Michel-Ange de Nantes reported another encounter with a man who spoke even more directly when he asked him in the presence of the patriarch: 'When will you leave this city?'. To this question, the Capuchin's response was deceivingly straightforward: 'If we ever do leave, there will be others who come in our place.'[98] This reply betrays little sense of a man who felt himself to be on the margins, far from the centre of Christianity. Instead, Michel-Ange de Nantes seems convicted of his rootedness and permanence, if not for himself

[97] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes to the *Propaganda Fide*, 22 May 1640 (Mosul), 479.
[98] BN, NAF 10220, Michel-Ange de Nantes to the *Propaganda Fide*, 8 July 1640 (Mosul), 483.



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than certainly on behalf of his order. His was a community that had its centre not in Rome, but in the neighbourhoods of Brittany, where he and his compatriots shared childhoods, memories, and sometimes even families, long before they ever arrived in the Ottoman empire.

In so much as this article is based only on the voices of Capuchins, further research remains to incorporate alongside these voices the perspectives of Ottoman Christians themselves. When we do so, we come into direct contact with communities of Eastern Christians who regarded themselves, if not as the centre of Christianity, then at least as autonomous Christians, each with their own independent visions of their place in the world. Here at the level of everyday life in communities scattered across different localities in the Ottoman empire, we begin to glimpse the possibility of a third way of imagining the 'missionary theatre' of the Ottoman empire: not a world of Eastern Christianity suspended in time on the margins of Western Christendom, nor simply another stage for the performance of global Catholic ambitions, but rather what Peter Brown has called, in a different context, a series of 'little Romes', that is, an archipelago of communities, each with its own particular set of priorities, worldviews and aspirations.[99] For some of these 'little Romes', friendship and proximity with Roman Catholicism was a path they were willing to explore so long as they could do so on their own terms. This was something that was well understood by the earliest Capuchins who lived in their midst, trying day after day to carve out for themselves a secure place in these other worlds.

[99] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 10th edn (London, 2013; first publ. 1996), xxvii.



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