

## The Franciscans and the Christian Orient - Milestones of a long presence

### Texts of the photographic exhibition

(by Michele Piccirillo and G. Claudio Bottini)

#### 1. Francis of Assisi in Egypt – 1219

Today scholars maintain, as a historical fact, the meeting between St. Francis and the Sultan el-Kamil. It suffices to read critically the many testimonies regarding this episode, of which the principle sources are the 6th Letter of Jacques de Vitry, his *Historia Occidentalis* (written before September 1221), the *Chronicles of Ernoul* (1227-1229), the *2nd Life of St. Francis* by Thomas Celano, and the *Legenda Maior* (1263) of St. Bonaventure.

After several attempts to reach the Saracens in 1212 in Syria and 1213 in Morocco, Francis finally realised his dream to be a missionary in 1219. Leaving Ancona, he embarked for Acco with the 5th Crusade. He could finally preach peace to the followers of Muhammed and the faithful of Christ.

He reached Damietta on the Nile delta with the Crusaders who had laid siege on the city for a year. On August 29, 1219 they suffered a severe setback. They could have conquered Damietta, but the Egyptian military machine recaptured this vitally important site. It was November 5, 1219. This is the historical context of the mission of Francis at the court of Sultan el Kamil around September 1219.

“I am a Christian. Lead me to your lord”, Francis said to the Saracens who had arrested him and Friar Illuminato. They were led to the Sultan in the village of Faraskur. Introduced into the tent of el Kamil, the Sultan warmly received them. Francis immediately made it clear that he had come not to renounce his faith nor carry a message from the Crusaders. He was there to expound the truth of the Christian religion before the Sultan and his dignitaries and sages. After having heard the words of the two friars, the men of the court judged that the friars should be put to death. But the Sultan was not in agreement, which went against the law of Muhammed. Instead, he listened willingly to Francis, which according to the *Historia Occidentalis* by Jacques de Vitry, said: “Pray for me that God may deign to reveal to me which law and faith is most pleasing to Him”. Francis’ mission attained its effect at least in part. Sultan el Kamil was no longer absolutely certain of the truth of his Islamic faith.

#### 2. Friar Alberto da Sarteano, Pontifical Legate to the Copts and Ethiopians – 1440-1442

On the wing of the bronze doors of St. Peter’s in the Vatican, under the figure of St. Peter giving the keys to Pope Eugene IV, are two other scenes. Pope Eugene receives nine personages in oriental costume, giving to the first of them a parchment. The text explains thus: “See how the Jacobite people embrace the Roman faith”. This took place in the Florentine church of St. Maria Novella on February 4, 1442, when the Bull of Union was promulgated with the Copts of Egypt. At the foot of the throne, a cardinal speaks with a friar identified as Blessed Alberto da Sarteano (Tuscany). From 1435 he was devoted to the successful outcome of the Council, going to the Orient where he remained for a year to survey the possibilities of success.

On July 7, 1439, a day after the proclamation of the Union with the Greek Church, the Pope and the Council nominated friar Alberto as Legate to the Copts and the Ethiopians; and on August 22, he nominated him as Commissary General to all the Orient, India, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Jerusalem. The Holy Father also provided him with letters addressed “to the beloved Coptic sons and their prelates in Jerusalem, and every other place in the Orient where they live”, and letters to “Prester John”, King of Ethiopia, and Thomas king of India, inviting them to participate in the Council.

Friar Alberto reached Jerusalem in June 1440 and met Nicodemus, the Abyssinian Abbot. He then reached Egypt where he met the Greek Patriarch Philoteus I, whom he kept up to date of the latest events regarding the Union; and the Coptic Patriarch John XI. The intention was to reach Ethiopia in order to meet with the Coptic Archbishop who was head of the local church. For this purpose, he needed a recommendation of safe-conduct from the Sultan, who refused. Nevertheless, friar Alberto was nominated Legate of the Coptic Patriarch at the Council together with Andreas, abbot of the monastery of St. Anthony. In September, he sailed from Alexandria to Rhodes where he waited for the arrival of Abbot Nicodemus from Jerusalem. The two delegations reached Florence in the summer of 1441.

### 3. Friar Giovanni of Calabria and “Prester John”, King of Ethiopia – 1482

In 1481, friar Giovanni Tomacelli, Custos of the Holy Land convinced a delegation of Ethiopians on pilgrimage to Cairo to ask the Coptic Patriarch for the election of a new Metropolitan to go to Rome and pay homage to the Pope. Friar Giovanni Battista Brocchi of Imola was chosen to be their guide and interpreter. The delegation was received by Pope Sixtus IV, with his personnel from the Curia and the Franciscan friar Roberto Caracciolo. The latter was the author of the *Specchio della Fede* in which he had added passages from the *Kitab el-Mi'raj* translated from the Arabic by Bonaventure of Siena.

From this visit was borne the decision to send a Franciscan delegation to “Prester John”, king of Ethiopia. The delegation comprised friars Giovanni of Calabria, Giovanni Battista Brocchi, and Francesco Sagara, a spaniard who did not complete the journey to Ethiopia. From January 1482, they journeyed with the Ethiopic mission, passing through Jerusalem to Cairo, and finally proceeding to Ethiopia where the Negus Iskandar reigned since 1478 as a child under the regency of his mother Romena. The *Royal Chronicles* read “Prelates from Holy Jerusalem arrived”. After them came the Ethiopic delegation with the letters and gifts of the Pope to the Negus.

On December 27, 1483, Giovanni Battista Brocchi returned to Jerusalem on orders of friar Giovanni of Calabria to update the new Custos of the Holy Land, friar Paolo del Canneto, on the success of the mission in Ethiopia and to give an account of the journey.

Father Francesco Suriano, who was at the Convent of Mount Zion, thought it well to insert this account into his *Treatise on the Holy Land and the Orient*.

From Suachin, friar Giovanni of Calabria and his companions travelled along the Gulf of Massaua, near the island of Dahlac. From there, they crossed Eritrea and Tigre, reaching the plateau of Gannata Ghiorgis, transversing the Wadi Ahya-fajj; and in Scioa, they entered the territory of the Negus.

### 4. A Friar graffitist at Dayr Mar Antun – 17th century

In the first decades of the 17th century, the monastery of St. Anthony in the eastern desert was used by the Franciscans to study the Arabic language; they would stay there for 7 or 8 months.

In a letter dated February 23, 1639, Fr. Andrea d'Arco suggested to the Secretary of the Propaganda Fide to send annually 40 scudi to the monastery for granting hospitality to the two or three friars intending to study Arabic. In another letter, dated April 18, 1639, Fr. Antonio da Virgoletta wrote to the Propaganda, asking for other missionaries to learn the Arabic language at the Monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi Natrun or at the Monastery of St. Anthony. Among this group was Fr. Gerard of Milan who left a description of the monastery and a beautiful testimony of the generosity of the Coptic monks.

The relationship between the Franciscans and the Coptic Church and the monastery of St. Anthony could have been the origin of the travel and stay at the monastery of friar Bernardo, a Sicilian who passed his time writing his name on walls and beams of the balustrades of the churches of St. Anthony and St. Mark.

The graffiti of friar Bernardo were noted by scholars since the 18th century. In 1716, C. Sicard mentioned that “quelques inscriptions qu'on lit sur les murs donnent à connaître que des Latins y ont célébré la Sainte Messe”. The most complete documentation was collected by O. Meinardus in 1966 and published in *Studia Orientalia Christiana Collectanea*. There is also a graffito found in the grotto of Jabal where St. Anthony lived. The recent restoration of the frescoes of the church of St. Anthony brought to light the letters of the graffiti mentioned above, and another two new graffiti hidden by the soot that covered the walls of the church.

The graffiti of friar Bernardo found in the church number six in all, including those of St. Mark's church and the grotto of St. Anthony. From these, one can date the writing and the period of Bernardo's stay at the monastery: “Friar Bernardo Trigilla of Ferla, of the Order of Friars Minor of the Observants of the Province of Sicily, a priest, was present at the monastery from December 31 1625 to January 10, 1626. During his sojourn, he lived and celebrated Mass in the church of St. Mark”, as he himself wrote:

FR(ater) BERNARDUS A FERULA . DE . OBSERVA(antia) . SICULUS sub die quarta januarii 1626  
 F(rater) /B(ernardus)/F(erulensis)/S(iculus)/P(rovinciae)/S(iciliae)/M(inor) / M(issionarius)/R(eformatus)  
 Fr(ater) Bernardus Trigillus Ferulensis Ordinis Minorum de Observantia Provinciae Siculae.  
 Haec aedes est Fr(atris) Bernardi Ferulensis Siculi  
 ad perpetuam rei memoriam

The relationship between the Franciscans and the Coptic Church and its monastery attested in the 1630s might also explain the title “primus visitator catholicus” in one of the graffiti. Given the official esteem of the title, one could conjecture the “C” of the inscription to mean “Custos” or “Commissarius (Apostolicus?)”, i.e. an administrative ecclesiastical authority which in that era, was conferred to the Custos of the Holy Land.

### 5. Tommaso Obicini of Novara, palestinologist and arabist – 17th century

Tommaso Obicini was born in Nonio (Novara, Italy) in 1585; he became a Franciscan and was ordained a priest in 1608. In 1612, he was nominated Vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land, but later left the post in April 1613 in order to dedicate himself to the study of the Arabic language. He was nominated Guardian of the friary in Aleppo in Syria. During his stay in Aleppo (1613-1620), he played a high-profiled role in attempting to unite the Chaldeans with the Church of Rome.

On March 14, 1620, he was nominated Custos of the Holy Land. While moving from Aleppo to Jerusalem, he passed through Nazareth where the abandoned sanctuary of the Annunciation stood, and he proposed to recover this site for the Christian cult.

In Jerusalem, he was confronted with the difficult situation experienced by the Custody. He re-organised some aspects of the friars' lives and undertook a dynamic building programme of sanctuaries and friaries. By mid-November, he reached Beirut to meet with the Emir Fakhr ad-Din and obtained the restitution of the sanctuary of Nazareth of which he took possession on November 29. He is also credited for recovering the sanctuary of St. John the Baptist in Ain Kerem, of which he took possession on April 29, 1621.

On March 29, 1621, he was confirmed as Custos of the Holy Land and on June 6, he made the journey to Rome to address the problems of the Custody.

In April 1622, he renounced the office of Custos and proposed to establish a College for the study of the Arab language in the friary of St. Pietro in Montorio in Rome. His proposal was accepted and the Congregation of Propaganda Fide entrusted him to teach the language. In Rome, he carried out his teaching ministry in the College and was advisor to the Congregation itself; he likewise collaborated in the revision of the Arab version of the Bible.

His love for the Holy Land was expressed in his writings. In 1623, he published five works containing rituals and texts of pious exercises practiced by the Franciscans and the account of the recovery of Ain Karem and Nazareth. In the same year, he published a work in which he disclosed the deplorable situation of the Holy Land sanctuaries, and a letter soliciting the patronage of the Medici family in Florence for the sanctuary of St. John in Ain Karem.

In 1626, he stayed in Venice to study Persian in order to prepare himself to rebut a Persian book entitled *Purifier of the Mirror* which was written against the Christians. In November of 1629, he returned to Rome and resumed his teaching activities. There he died on November 7, 1632.

A less known expertise of Obicini is his skill for the Arabic language. His writings on linguistics of note are as follows:

(1) *Isagoge Idest* (in arabic), *breve Introductorium Arabicum, in Scientiam Logices cum versione Latina ac Theses sanctae Fidei*, Romae 1621.

The book proposes to introduce to missionaries the philosophical and theological concepts of the Orientals so that they may debate with Muslims.

(2) *Grammatica arabica* (in arabic), *Agrumia appellata. Cum versione Latina, ac dilucida expositione*, Romae 1631.

It is a translation accompanied by a commentary of the Arabic grammar by Muhammed ibn Da'ud as-Singaji.

(3) *Thesaurus Arabico-Syro-Latinus*, Romae 1636.

It is a revised translation of some nomenclature by Elia bar Shinaya, also called Elia of Nisibi (died after 1049)

(4) *Scala* (= coptic manuscripts that contain grammar and vocabulary). *Grammatica egiziana e dizionario egiziano-arabo-latino*.

This is a manuscript which contains the complete translation of the grammar by al-As'ad abu-I Faraj ibn al-'Assal, the incomplete grammar by Giovanni al-Wajih al-Qalyubi, and the incomplete grammar of Abu-I Barakat. The translation is in both Latin and Italian. There is also the transcription in latin characters of the Coptic pronunciation as used in 17th century Egypt

It is to Obicini's merit that the Western world came to know of the Sinai inscriptions. A collection of inscriptions have been preserved. We also have an account of how Obicini –while passing through Mount Sinai– the monks showed him an inscription attributed to the prophet Jeremiah.

There are also fifty-six letters of Obicini that are of considerable interest. In one of these letters, dated

January 10, 1618 and addressed to Pietro Della Valle (the celebrated Italian traveller), Obicini reveals his erudition and knowledge of Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic. On December 4, 1623, he wrote to Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564-1631) to escort the dispatch of a Samaritan Pentateuch, an important manuscript no later than the 10th century kept in the Ambrosian Library today.

## 6. Franciscans, Armenians and Georgians

“We have found the most illustrious personages of the world here” – thus wrote Jerome from Bethlehem to Marcella in the fourth century; here was marvelled the multitudes of monks and virgins: the flower and ornament of the Church.. From Gaul came the most celebrated personages. The Breton, who had just taken some strides toward religion, turns his back on the West and comes to visit the places unknown to him if not for its fame from the Scriptures. “And what can we say about Armenia, Persia, India, Ethiopia, Pontus and Cappadocia, the fruitful lands of monarchism almost like Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, of all the swarms of hermits that come from the East and who give a vibrant display of all the virtues? The languages are different but the piety is the same. From the many nations of the world, we find other voices singing praises in Jerusalem.”

That St. Jerome was not exaggerating, can be attested by Eusebius of Caesarea and Rufinus of Aquileia, a contemporary who lived on the Mt. of Olives in Jerusalem. Both wrote of the conversion to Christianity of the two Caucasian states of Armenia and Georgia during the time of Constantine, and of the close rapport these new Christian peoples had with Jerusalem.

Armenian monks and pilgrims living in the Holy Land were organised into autonomous communities. The bishop of Jerusalem was suffragan to the Patriarch and Catholicos of all the Armenians, who resided in the Holy City of Etchmiadzin in Armenia. The creation of the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem was sanctioned by an edict of Mameluke Sultan nasir Muhammed in 1311.

The first Franciscan to be associated with Armenia was friar Domenico of Aragon, carrier of a letter from Pope Innocent IV to King Hethun I and the Catholicos Constantine I in 1246. Towards 1280, friar Giovanni of Monte Corvino arrived in Cilicia. The Crown Prince and future King Hethrun II enthusiastically called for and welcomed the friars who constructed a friary in the capital Sis. Towards the end of the century, the same king became a Franciscan, taking the name of friar Giovanni, as is testified in the royal seal preserved in Venice.

The first historical evidence of the conversion of the Iberians (or Georgians) to Christianity was transmitted by the well-known Rufinus of Aquileia who lived on Mt. of Olives in Jerusalem. He had heard it from King Bakur of Iberia, head of the militia of the Emperor Teodosius the Great. Bakur, who was in Jerusalem in an official capacity to defend the boundaries of Palestine, recounted that “the merit of this great blessing goes to a woman prisoner” whom later sources named Nino.

St. Jerome was still alive when a young prince from the ruling house of far away Iberia came to the Holy Sites on pilgrimage. He was Nabarnugios, son of King Bosmarios – as recounted by his biographer Giovanni Rufo. From Jerusalem he headed to the peak of Mt. Nebo in Transjordan in order to visit the sanctuary, which Christians had constructed in honour of Moses the prophet and man of God. On the mountain, the young prince met with a Egyptian recluse monk who had lived in a cell for forty years. In a spirit of prophecy he acknowledged him and urged the prince to embrace the monastic life.

In the museum of the *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*, two Georgian inscriptions are preserved. They are considered by experts to be among the most ancient testimonies of this language. Found by Fr. Virgilio Corbo in the 1950s in a small Georgian monastery among the olive-groves of Bir al-Qutt in a valley between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, it is unknown in written sources. The principle inscription reads: “With the help of Christ and the intercession of St. Theodorios, have mercy on the abbot Anthony and Joshua the founder of this monastery, and his father and mother. Amen.” In the other two inscriptions are preserved the names of other monks of the monastery: Bakur, Gregory, Omizd, Maruan, and Burrzn.

Inside the Armenian monastery of St James in Jerusalem is a medieval chapel of Deir al-Zeitun, named after the olive tree on which Jesus was bound when he was brought to the former High Priest Annas. Indeed to pilgrims, this church was known as the House of Annas. The Franciscans found hospitality near this church in 1551 when they were forced out of their friary near the Cenacle just a few hundred meters away, but outside the Turkish city walls.

The Franciscan community then found a new residence inside the city in the Georgian monastery of Dayr al-Amud (Monastery of the Column) at the northwest angle of the wall. In 1555, it became the Franciscan friary of St. Saviour. A Turkish document made this sufficiently clear: the governor of the city found a new lodging for the friars who had been forced out of their monastery.

### 7. The Franciscans and the Greeks. The ecumenical pilgrimage of friar Pantaleao de Aveira 1552

Friar Pantaleao de Aveira, a Portuguese, was called by Fr. Bonifacio da Ragusa to join the fraternity of the Holy Land during his third term of office as Custos (1562-1564) when the friars had moved to the friary of St. Saviour.

In the *Itinerary of the Holy Land and its particularities* published in 1596, friar Pantaleao recounts his extraordinary pilgrimage to the Jordan River and ascent to Mt. Nebo with the Guardian of the Bethlehem friary and Greek Orthodox monks of the Laura of St. Saba. They were guided by the Abbot Caly who introduced them to the desert Bedouins as monks of his own monastery. They moreover needed to dress themselves in the black robes of the monks of St. Saba. This little group comprised Abbot Caly and two of his monks, two Franciscans, a Christian from Bethlehem, and an Arab Bedouin. Friar Pantaleao recounts: “The venerable Abbot called Caly had lived in that desert for more than thirty years and was well known and loved by all the bedouins who considered him a saint.”

Having reached the river and recited prayers, they passed the night in some huts made of branches, constructed by the resourceful and benevolent Abbot. The next morning “[we] ended the prayers, singing the psalm *In exitu Israel de Egypto, domus Jacob de populo barbaro*, alternating each verse in Latin and Greek. We then took our clothes off and gave them to the Christians or Arabs who crossed them over to the other bank because they knew well how to swim. In two crossings, all the clothes and other things were crossed over to the other bank and then we ourselves crossed the river; and myself not being a good swimmer, everyone helped me.

Once we reached the other side, we started walking to Mt. Nebo which stood before us. At around midday, we arrived at the peak of the mount, the place where Moses contemplated the Promised Land as is indicated by a dilapidated church. I asked the Abbot Caly where the church dedicated to St. Moses was, since I had heard from our Father Guardian in Jerusalem that it was built in the place where the body of the blessed prophet was presumably buried. The Abbot replied that he would take us there; and as we descended the mountain we came to a valley and saw an ancient church, in better conditions than the previous one. We entered and prayed, recommending ourselves to the Lord God and his servant Moses. We considered ourselves very privileged to have seen that place.”

One of the sanctuaries most frequented by Franciscans of the Holy Land was the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai, where they are welcomed with great hospitality by the monks of the Greek community. In the monastery is preserved a painting which depicts the arrival of the Archbishop of Mt. Sinai to Sinai. In the caravan are two Franciscans riding their camels.

### 8. Fr. Girolamo Golubovich, a giant of modern Palestinology (1865-1941)

Fr. Girolamo is the author of the *Biblioteca Bio-bibliografica di Terra Santa e dell'oriente Francese*, a real gold mine at the disposal of scholars, even more esteemed and used today than before. It was composed through many years of patient research in the libraries and archives of Europe. Among the intentions of the founders for the goals of the Center in Muski was the continuation of the work of Fr. Golubovich who rediscovered and retrieved the memory of long-forgotten events regarding the long history of the Franciscan presence in the Orient.

Born in Constantinople to a Dalmatian family in 1865, Fr. Golubovich was baptised Anthony. As a youth, he came to Jerusalem with his mother in 1879. He was received into the Franciscan seminary in Ain Kerem and then into the novitiate in Nazareth where his name was changed to Jerome in honour of the saint from his fatherland. He then studied philosophy in Bethlehem and theology at the friary of St. Saviour in Jerusalem. In 1888, he was ordained a priest and his first assignment was the reorganisation of the library of St. Saviour's. Wanting to be a missionary in Armenia, he began studying Turkish. But his superiors sent him instead to Cyprus where he perfected his Greek and then was later sent in 1893 to Aleppo where he taught Italian. The following year, he was sent to both Alexandria and Port Said in Egypt and then finally returning to Limassol in Cyprus

In 1896, the new Custos of the Holy Land Fr. Aurelio Briante recalled him to Jerusalem and entrusted him to compile a summarised history of the seven centuries of Franciscan presence in the Holy Land. In 1898, Fr. Girolamo published a work that was to constitute the framework for his future historical research, the *Serie cronologica dei Reverendissimi Superiori di Terra Santa*. It was a work that was awarded the Gold Medal at the Sacred Art Exhibition in Turin, when the author acted as guide to the stand of the Custody of the Holy Land. During his stay in Italy, Fr. Girolamo continued his research in the library and archive of Turin, in the Vatican library, in Assisi, and Venice, in order to complete what he had begun in the archives of the Custody of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, perfecting the ideas of the *Biblioteca*, that is, the publication of the documents regarding the history of the Custody.

With the permission of Fr. Briante, he set out again to make long visits to the Italian libraries. In Perugia, he had the joy of discovering the original *Treatise on the Holy Land and the Orient* by Fr. Francesco Suriano, which Golubovich published several months later in Milan. In Naples, he discovered the *Chronicles* of Blessed Bernardino of Aquila regarding the first century of the Observant Friars and the *Report* of friar Giovanni da Tagliacozzo on the victory obtained by St. John Capistran against the Turks in 1456 under the walls of Belgrade. These are two documents of great historical importance; and because they were not directly related to Golubovich's research, he gave them over to Fr. Leonard Lemmens, a scholar of Franciscan history. In April 1902, Fr. Girolamo discovered in the Vatican Apostolic Library the original unedited *Ichnographiae Monumentorum Terrae Sanctae* by Fr. Elzeario Horn. By June, an edition of this precious manuscript was already in the hands of scholars.

In October, he was recalled to the East and sent to the friary in Constantinople, the city of his birth. Thanks to his knowledge of Turkish, he was able to explore the library and archives of the capital of the Ottoman empire, on which for five centuries Jerusalem and the Franciscan community living in the friary of St. Saviour depended on.

In 1904, he was nominated member of the College for Franciscan Studies in Quaracchi near Florence. Fr. Girolamo stayed there for the rest of his life until his death in 1941. That same year, he had published in continuous succession the volumes of the *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica di Terra Santa*. At the same time he had directed the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, the periodical on Franciscan studies founded by himself. Fr. Girolamo, while dying, said to friar Michelangelo Tizzani who assisted him, "Put everything (books and documents) in the cases, add my bones, and send it all to Jerusalem".

### 9. Franciscan Center for Oriental Christian Studies (from 1954)

On April 21, 1632, the Custos of the Holy Land, Fr. Paolo da Lodi, obtained from the Consul of Venice Giovanni Donato, a permanent house for the Franciscans in Cairo. The friars were chaplains of the Venetian colony in the city for many years. The Venetian merchant Domenico Savio conceded his own house "adjacent to the choir of the Venetian chapel", for this purpose. The embassy was situated next to the Muski quarter – the famous market of Cairo, today being 12 Bendaka (=Venetian) street.

The great influx of Europeans, favoured by Muhammed Ali and his successors, made the friary of Muski the largest Latin parish in Cairo. It saw its greatest development in the final decades of the 1800s and the first two decades of the 1900s with almost 20,000 faithful made up mostly of Italians and also a good number of Maltese, Austrians, Slavs, French, and Orientals. The church – which was raised to a cathedral in 1858 – was a point of reference for all these nationalities, as testified by the rich parochial archive dating as early as 1611.

With the Second World War (1939-1945), the Egyptian Revolution (1952), and the occupation of the Suez Canal (1956), the number of the faithful diminished resulting with the exodus of foreigners. Today the Latin parish consists of only a few families.

In order to respond to the new cultural and ecclesial sensibilities, and to utilise better the great friary, the Custody of the Holy Land decided to found a Franciscan Center for Oriental Christian Studies. On September 16, 1954, the Custos of the Holy Land Fr. Giacinto Faccio, officially inaugurated the Center. Present at the ceremony were the first President of the Egyptian Republic Mohammed Naguib, the Apostolic Delegate, and various civil and religious dignitaries.

In the beginning the purpose of the Center was not clearly defined, but very quickly two objectives were determined: a) to continue the research on the history of the Holy Land, in the footsteps of Fr. Girolamo Golubovich; b) to promote the studies regarding the Christian communities of the Middle East in continuity with the tradition of the Custody of the Holy Land.

There are two principle activities carried out by the Center: a) to conduct scientific research and publication of texts and studies on the Christian communities and the presence of the Franciscans on the Middle East; b) to look into the cultural contacts between Christians and non-Christians, locals and foreigners.

Since its beginning, the Center has had its own library, the nucleus of which is constituted with books from the various friaries of the Custody of the Holy Land. It is divided into two great sections: (1) general material subdivided into theology, history, geography, art, etc... and (2) the special discipline formed by the cultural patrimony of each Oriental Christian community (Copt, Armenian, Syrian, etc.). To these specialised sections is added the Christian religio-cultural material written in the Arabic language.

Currently, the library is considered among the best in Cairo, and unique for its kind. Containing more than fifty thousand volumes, in addition to a good collection of periodicals as well as Arab-Christian, Western, and Islamic manuscripts. The studies of those assigned to the center and their collaborators are published in the annual periodical *Studia Orientalia Christiana*, *Collectanea* (= *SOC Collectanea*) and its *SOC Monographiae* series.

(English translation by Lionel Goh)