



Roman Catholics in Constantinople

Summary :

The situation of the Latin-rite community changed dramatically at the final Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Many of the Latin-rite inhabitants of Ottoman Istanbul fled both before and after its fall, however, a core group of families remained. If the first three Ottoman centuries were characterized by a certain level of stasis, the nineteenth century brought significant change to Istanbul's Roman Catholics. There was remarkable growth in the community by immigrants and refugees from Europe, as well as by Armenians and other eastern Christians who continued to convert in relatively small numbers.

Date

15th-20th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople / Istanbul

1. Roman Catholics in Constantinople/Istanbul

From the early Middle Ages, individuals and groups of Roman Catholic (or Latin-rite) merchants, diplomats and adventurers were regularly, but only temporarily, present in Constantinople. The roots of the resident Latin-rite community, however, trace back to the eleventh century when Venice was granted permission to establish a commercial colony in recognition of its military support of the Byzantine emperors. In the subsequent centuries, and particularly following the [fourth crusade](#) in 1204, the Latin-rite presence grew exponentially. The two largest groups were the [Venetians](#), who inhabited a quarter within Constantinople proper, and the [Genoese](#), who occupied the suburb of [Galata](#) (also called Pera), facing the capital across the Golden Horn. In addition, there were also not insignificant communities of Catalans, Florentines, and Ragusans in the city. This was the heyday of Latin Christendom in Constantinople, evidenced by the thirty-five churches established there over the course of several centuries.

2. The Magnifica Comunità

The situation of the Latin-rite community changed dramatically at the final [Ottoman conquest of Constantinople](#) in 1453. While the capital city experienced significant damage, Sultan [Mehmed II](#) generally spared Galata both in recognition of the inhabitants' timely decision to cooperate during the final siege, and because he wanted to protect its significant commerce. Many of the Latin-rite inhabitants of Ottoman [Istanbul](#) fled both before and after its fall, however, a core group of families, primarily of Genoese extraction, remained. This small community was centered in Galata, and was known as the *Magnifica Comunità* (a very common term, used to describe communities existing in many cities under the Venetian realm). It was overseen by a council of twelve officials, who replaced the pre-conquest Genoese [podestà](#), and was granted limited legal and ceremonial rights primarily associated with the administration of the Latin churches in greater Istanbul. Unlike other non-Muslim subject [millets](#), or religious communities, the Magnifica Comunità was not accorded legal or political rights, but rather was under the administrative purview of Galata's Ottoman officials.¹

The geographical and spiritual focus of the *Magnifica Comunità* centered on the most important remaining Latin-rite church in the Ottoman capital, the cathedral of San Francesco in Galata. This was where the leaders of the community met, where communal and religious archives were preserved, it was the seat of the city's most important confraternity, and was the home of a small community of Franciscans, the largest religious order still in the city. Other important religious sites included the Jesuit church of San Benedetto with its school and large library, San Giorgio with its Capuchin school, the hospital of San Giovanni, and the small chapel of Sant'Antonio Abbate whose miraculous waters ([agiasmata](#)) were universally renowned among the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim populations of Istanbul.

3. The Early Modern Era

Throughout the Ottoman period, the Latin-rite community of Istanbul was very small, particularly in comparison with the [Orthodox](#),



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[Armenian](#), [Jewish](#) and other minorities. Several reports from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries place the total number of Roman Catholic subjects of the sultans at 500 (approximately two dozen families). In addition, there were 2000 slaves, 500 freed slaves, and 700 merchants and embassy staff temporarily in the city. While these other groups numbers fluctuated significantly, the size of the *Magnifica Comunità* remained relatively unchanged until the nineteenth century.²

Because of their small numbers, the Latin-rite community had to struggle continuously to preserve its distinctive identity and to avoid being assimilated into Istanbul's other, much larger populations. The distinctive dress of the Perots (as the indigenous Ottoman Roman Catholics were known), which included a high white collar and a unique cap for the men, and a Ragusan bonnet worn by the women, was a constant visual marker.³ Education was another mean of conserving religious identity: in the early modern period Jesuit and Capuchin schools were instituted in Galata at the community's request to instruct and to catechize their children in Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. These schools also educated many non-Catholic children, and were an effective evangelical tool.

Religion was a central element of the Latin-rite Ottomans' identity, and an important aspect of this was the administration of the community's sacred edifices and the perpetuation of its rituals. As the last vestiges of the Latin-rite community in the Ottoman capital, the rectors of the *Magnifica Comunità* ardently defended their right to govern the city's Roman Catholic churches, confraternities, hospitals, and monasteries, as well as its ritual life of processions and holy feasts. This proved to be a source of recurring conflict between the Latin-rite community, its French and Venetian patrons, and the papacy. The primary issue was one of sovereignty: during Byzantine times, the Latin church in Constantinople was overseen by a patriarch selected by the pope. Following the Ottoman conquest, however, these patriarchs were no longer able to live in the city, and so patriarchal vicars were appointed, often from Venetian lands, to oversee the community's churches and religious, as well as to ensure orthodoxy and obedience to Rome.

While these patriarchal vicars in theory were the final authority in all religious matters pertaining to the Roman Catholic community, in practice they visited the city rarely, if ever. Thus the *Magnifica Comunità* - which claimed that Mehmed the Conqueror had awarded it dominion over Istanbul's Latin-rite churches in a 1453 [ahdname](#), or treaty - enjoyed significant de facto autonomy. The confused question of authority over the churches and religious matters in the Ottoman capital gave rise to regular jurisdictional disputes. In 1622, for example, Rome sought to assert its position by replacing the patriarchal vicar with a bishop, a move which the *Magnifica Comunità* strongly opposed. The conflict eventually came to a head in 1643 when the community was excommunicated, though only briefly.

Despite their best efforts, over the course of the early modern period, the *Magnifica Comunità* dwindled as families died out, individuals immigrated to Europe, or more often assimilated into the larger Greek Orthodox and Muslim populations. An observer in 1582 estimated that the community had lost 400 households to the Orthodox alone, and while less common, conversion to Islam also enticed some. Intermarriage between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox (and occasionally the Muslim) communities was also so common that in 1627 the patriarchal vicar tried unsuccessfully to prohibit all such unions.⁴

Even if they did not convert or marry into Islam or Orthodoxy, the Latin-rite Ottomans fought a losing battle to maintain their distinctiveness. The seventeenth century traveller, Pietro della Valle, reported that they observed the Latin-rite, but in their "customs [...] are Grecized [*grecheggiano*]."⁵ This process of assimilation was most evident linguistically, as Greek increasingly became the community's primary spoken language, even as Italian continued as the official, administrative idiom. This gradual marginalization of the Latin-rite community accelerated over the course of the seventeenth century, as the Perots were gradually replaced by Greeks as diplomatic and commercial intermediaries during the period of the [Phanariots](#). This process reached its culmination in 1682 when the last vestiges of the community's nominal self-governance disappeared and the *Magnifica Comunità* passed completely under direct Ottoman administration.

The gradual reduction of the *Magnifica Comunità* was offset by the immigration of some few Roman Catholics to Istanbul, but even more by conversions which resulted from the efforts of Jesuit and other missionaries who were active in Ottoman lands. Their work was necessarily limited to the non-Muslim population of the empire, and the bulk of conversions came from the Armenian community in Istanbul, many of whom were induced to convert through their association with Jesuit and Capuchin schools in Galata. Indeed, by 1700 there were 8,000 Armenian Catholics in the capital, who so far outnumbered the remains of the original *Magnifica Comunità*,



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that the label of Catholic came to signify specifically Armenians, while Latin or Frank was used to refer to Roman Catholics with European genealogies.⁶

4. Roman Catholics in the Final Century of the Ottoman Empire

If the first three Ottoman centuries were characterized by a certain level of stasis, the nineteenth century brought significant change to Istanbul's Roman Catholics. There was [marked growth](#) in the community as Italians, Spanish, Poles and other immigrants and refugees fled European troubles, and as Armenians and other eastern Christians continue to convert in relatively small numbers. There was as a concomitant increase in the number of clergy and nuns, who numbered almost 100 by mid-century, and a new church was constructed by the Capuchins in 1845. Galata also was home to a growing number of Roman Catholic primary and boarding schools for both boys and girls, which also attracted many Greek, Armenian, Muslim and Jewish students. By 1872 the number of Latin Catholics in Istanbul and its environs numbered approximately 22,000, divided among eleven parishes, with Armenian Catholics numbering over 30,000.⁷ The dynamic political conditions in Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries significantly impacted Istanbul's Latin-rite community. During the Greek revolt in the early nineteenth century, for a time Ottoman Catholics, along with other Christians, were viewed with suspicion, but by the [Tanzimat](#) era (1839-1876) concerns about Catholic loyalty had dissipated, and indeed some individuals obtained official positions of significant influence. Questions regarding the political loyalties of Ottoman Roman Catholics resurfaced with the Ottoman entry into World War I on the side of the Central Powers. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the systematic massacre of the Armenians, jeopardized the situation of the empire's Roman Catholics and led to a precipitous decline in its numbers. This was exacerbated during the post-war years when Istanbul was occupied by the allies, and during the four years of war which resulted in the declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923. These events led to a dramatic reduction in the size of the Roman Catholic community to levels not seen since the sixteenth century: in 1927 it numbered only 3,400 individuals.⁸

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Glossary :

	agiasma
The holy water (as well as the sacred place from where the water spurts), which the faithful drink, sprinkle or wash themselves in order to be healed.	
	ahdname
Document issued by the Ottoman sultan, which grants privileges to communities or persons.	
	podesta or potesta
(lat. Potestas – power): name given to certain high officials in many Italian cities. The podesta was also: a) governor of the Venetian sector of the Latin Empire of Constantinople. b) head of the Genoese City Hall (14th-15th centuries) , governor in the Genoese acquisitions of Romania (Galata and Chios). c) Lombard magistrate in Euboea.	