

Arenas of charisma: memory and devotion to Abūnā Bshara Abou Mourad in the construction of the Greek Catholic community in Lebanon

Arenas de carisma: memória e devoção ao Abūnā Bshara Abou Mourad na construção da comunidade greco-católica no Líbano

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the production and mobilization of the charisma of the Greek Catholic monk-priest Bshara Abou Mourad within the Lebanese context. Known as Abūnā (Father) Bshara, this monk plays a central role in the Greek Catholic community, particularly due to his ongoing canonization process in the Vatican, which, if successful, would make him the only saintly representative of this confession. The study investigates the transmission of his charismatic memory and devotional practices in the Lebanese localities associated with his ecclesiastical journey: Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar. Drawing on a Weberian concept of charisma, focused on the individual's extraordinary qualities, but expanding this approach to include its embodiment in objects, images, and its territorial diffusion, the article argues that, in various spaces within these municipalities—designated as “arenas of charisma”—the spiritual power of Abūnā Bshara plays a crucial role in shaping the Greek Catholic community in Lebanon. This phenomenon not only manifests within these arenas but also extends to a national and even regional scale, functioning as a symbol of identity for the confession in contrast to other communities in Lebanon's multiconfessional and sectarian landscape. Thus, by analyzing charisma across multiple scales (local, national, and regional) and through various perspectives (memorial, devotional, and sectarian), this article contributes to the theory of charisma and its broader implications.

Keywords: Arenas of charisma, Memory, Devotion, Bshara Abou Mourad, Greek Catholic Community.

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RESUMO

Este artigo examina a produção e mobilização do carisma do monge e padre greco-católico Bshara Abou Mourad no contexto libanês. Conhecido como Abūnā (padre) Bshara, este monge desempenha um papel central na comunidade greco-católica, especialmente devido ao seu processo de canonização no Vaticano, que, se bem-sucedido, o tornará o único santo representante desta confissão. O estudo investiga a transmissão de sua memória carismática e práticas devocionais nas localidades libanesas associadas à sua trajetória eclesiástica: Joun, Zahle e Dayr al-Qamar. Partindo de uma concepção weberiana de carisma, focada nas qualidades excepcionais do indivíduo, mas expandindo essa abordagem para incluir sua materialização em objetos, imagens e sua difusão territorial, o artigo argumenta que, em diferentes espaços dessas municipalidades—designados como “arenas de carisma”—o poder espiritual de Abūnā Bshara desempenha um papel crucial na construção da comunidade greco-católica no Líbano. Esse fenômeno não apenas se manifesta nessas arenas, mas também se projeta em escala nacional e até regional, funcionando como um símbolo de identidade para a confissão, em contraste com outras comunidades no cenário multiconfessional e sectário do Líbano. Assim, ao analisar o carisma em múltiplas escalas (local, nacional e regional) e através de diversas perspectivas (memorial, devocional e sectária), este artigo contribui para a teoria do carisma e suas implicações mais amplas.

Palavras-chave: Arenas de carisma, Memória, Devoção, Bshara Abou Mourad, Comunidade Greco-Católica.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2016, I conducted my first ethnographic visit to the Greek Catholic monastery of *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*¹ (The Holy Savior Monastery²). This sacred space, located in the village of Joun in the mountainous region of southern Lebanon, serves as the *maison*

¹ This article follows an adapted version of the International Journal of the Middle East Studies (IJMES) guidelines for transliterating the Arabic alphabet. While adhering to all other IJMES rules, this version differs in its use of capital letters at the beginning of proper names, deviating from the official guidelines, which prescribes lower cases for all transliterated terms. This adaption aims to make the text more accessible and familiar to a broader western audience. The IJMES' guidelines are available in: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-file-manager/file/57d83390f6ea5a022234b400/TransChart.pdf>. Accessed on: Nov. 19, 2024.

² *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ* can also be transliterated as Convent Saint Savior.

mère (motherhouse) of the Salvatorian Order³. Upon entering the town, I encountered images of a monk displayed in local homes, although I was unaware of his identity at the time. As I approached the monastery, these images became more frequent, and once inside, I was struck by the numerous items associated with this figure. There were not only images but also biographies, a biographical film, and his personal belongings, preserved in the room he once inhabited, which has since been turned into a museum. Among these artifacts, the monastery houses his “dominant symbol”⁴ (Turner, 1967), his tomb, located in the main church, where devotees gather around an altar to offer prayers.

That same day, I gathered information from both clergy and laypeople about the monk whose memory seemed omnipresent in and around the monastery. The first accounts provided by those present highlighted the monk’s significance. Observing the devotion of the faithful, especially at his tomb, I became increasingly intrigued by his importance to both the Salvatorian Order and the inhabitants of Joun and its surroundings.

The sacred figure in question is Bshara Abou Mourad, a Salvatorian priest who is currently in the process of being canonized by the Vatican, potentially becoming the first saint of the Middle Eastern Greek Catholic community⁵. Bshara Abou Mourad, or simply Abūnā Bshara, as he is known to both clergy and laypeople, was born Sélim in 1853 in Zahle, in the Bekaa Valley of eastern Lebanon. In September 1874, he entered the Salvatorian motherhouse, beginning his ecclesiastical journey. In the same month, he was admitted to the novitiate, received the religious habit, and adopted the name Bshara, meaning “annunciation.”

After completing his studies at *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*, Abūnā Bshara was ordained as a priest in December 1883. In October 1891, he was appointed to a pastoral mission in the village of Dayr al-Qamar, located in the Chouf Mountains of Mount Lebanon. For thirty years, he served

3 The full name of the Salvatorian Order in English is “Basilian Order of the Most Holy Savior”. In Arabic, the name of the Order is *Rahbāniyya al-Mukhalliṣ*. In this article, I use the English name to avoid confusing the reader with too many Arabic terms. Salvatorian Order is a monastic institution affiliated with the Greek Catholic community in the Middle East, with its headquarters located in Lebanon. It was established in 1683 by Aftimiyus Saifi, who served as the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Tire and Sidon. At that time, Saifi represented a pro-Catholic faction within the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, which played a role in the formation of the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate in 1724. The Order draws inspiration from Basilian monasticism, following the teachings of Saint Basil, an ancient Greek monk who advocated for communal living among monks, shared religious practices and manual work. For an explanation about the term “Melkite” see Cruz (2022).

4 The notion of “dominant symbol” was introduced by Victor Turner (1967) to designate the key elements such as objects, images, gestures, speeches, and practices that hold significance within a particular ritual. In this paper, I am applying this concept to underscore the pivotal importance of the tomb of Abūnā Bshara as a symbol within the ritual space of *Dayr al Mukhalis*.

5 I use the expression “Middle Eastern Greek Catholic Community” to specify that it refers to a Greek Catholic community under the Middle Eastern Patriarchate, based in Damascus, as there are also Greek Catholics belonging to other patriarchates, particularly in Eastern Europe.

as the parish priest of the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās* (Saint Elijah Church) - which is a Greek Catholic church located in the center of the town - in addition to opening churches and celebrating Mass in nearby villages. Following a brief period of service at the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Sidon and Dayr al-Qamar in Sidon, the elderly Abūnā Bshara returned to Joun. Weary and in poor health, he spent the last three years of his life in the *maison mère*, passing away on February 22, 1930 (Bacha, 1995).

From then on, the Salvatorian Order, together with the Archdiocese of Sidon and Dayr al-Qamar, began compiling the dossier for his beatification, a process that was officially recognized by the Vatican in June 1983. With the completion of this initial stage, the priest was formally granted the title of Servant of God (Sabbagh, 2000, p. 238). Later, in recognition of his ecclesiastical virtues, Pope Benedict XVI issued a decree on December 11, 2010, conferring upon him the title of Venerable. Currently, the Vatican is reviewing a miracle attributed to Abūnā Bshara after his death as part of the beatification process. Once this miracle is confirmed, he will be designated as Blessed, and following the acknowledgment of another post-beatification miracle, he may be officially canonized as a saint.

In parallel, both clergy and laypeople have actively worked to preserve and transmit the memory of Abūnā Bshara, especially in the municipalities most closely associated with his religious journey: Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar. This effort involves reproducing narratives of his virtues and miracles, as well as conveying his memory through material culture. The result has been the establishment of sacred spaces and specific areas within these regions as “places of memory” (Nora, 1985) and *loci* of devotion, which I will broadly refer to as “arenas of charisma.” These arenas represent distinct contexts where Abūnā Bshara’s charisma is both activated and mobilized, encompassing physical, sacred, symbolic, and social spaces in Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar, all of which are intricately linked to the Salvatorian monk’s religious life.

The initial concept of charisma used in this research is grounded in Max Weber’s definition, which describes it as “a personal quality considered extraordinary and, by virtue of which, a person is thought to possess supernatural powers or qualities...”. Weber further argues that charismatic authority is linked to the followers’ recognition of the leader’s vocation, as well as to the demonstrations of personal qualities or miracles performed by the charismatic figure (Weber, 2015 [1922], p.159). Devotees acknowledge Abūnā Bshara’s virtues and the miracles attributed to him as extraordinary traits, viewed as a supernatural gift rooted in biographical narratives and oral traditions. These accounts indicate that, from a young age, Sélim exhibited remarkable devotion, setting him apart from other children. Furthermore, his ascetic and charitable practices throughout his ecclesiastical life reflect his followers’ recognition that his virtues exceeded those of ordinary individuals.

While Weber's conception of charisma, which emphasizes personal qualities and extraordinary virtues (Adair-Toteff, 2021), is certainly relevant, it does not capture all the dimensions evident in my ethnographic material. To enhance this analysis, I incorporate insights from other scholars who broaden the understanding of charisma by examining its manifestations in objects, symbols, and rituals. For example, Tambiah (1984) illustrates how charisma can be conferred upon sacred objects and images, allowing devotion to extend beyond the physical presence of an individual and proliferate through material representations. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of Abūnā Bshara, whose personal belongings are exhibited in museums, and whose images can be found throughout various sacred spaces and regions.

Moreover, Hansen and Verkaaik (2009) and Pinto (2017) highlight the territorial dimension of charisma, illustrating how it can extend beyond sacred spaces and be activated across wider geographical contexts. The devotion to Abūnā Bshara exemplifies this phenomenon, as it transcends specific sacred sites and permeates various locations in Joun, Zahle, Dayr al-Qamar, and their surrounding areas.

Additionally, the concept of charisma can be understood as "charismatic energy," a dynamic force arising from ritual practices and shared devotion across various contexts, enabling believers to have profound encounters with the sacred. This perspective, inspired by Paula Pryce, is particularly pertinent in the context of Abūnā Bshara's devotion, where the religious leader's charisma not only draws individuals to faith but also collectively shapes the identity of the Greek Catholic community. Collective engagement, heightened through performative practices, plays a vital role in fostering a sense of unity among group members and reinforcing communal bonds. Thus, charismatic energy manifests itself in arenas of devotion, enhancing the vitality of the community (Pryce, 2021).

In light of this, the central argument of this article is that the charisma of Abūnā Bshara, cultivated and mobilized across various arenas, plays a direct role in shaping the Greek Catholic community in Lebanon. This phenomenon manifests itself in two key ways: first, through the transmission of his memory, which elevates the Salvatorian monk to a symbol of this political-religious community and an ethical exemplar for its members; second, through collective devotion, which actively fosters and strengthens the community by facilitating shared religious experiences and cultivating a sense of unity.

Finally, by examining another dimension of charisma—its relationship to the sociocultural dynamics and power structures of a society (Geertz, 1983)—I contend that Abūnā Bshara's charismatic influence not only fortifies the Greek Catholic community in Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar but also transcends these local boundaries, being mobilized on a national scale. In a context marked by sectarian competition among Lebanon's diverse political-religious communities, Abūnā Bshara's charisma plays a vital role in shaping the identity of the Greek

Catholic community. It acts as a “diacritical sign” (Barth, 1969), reinforcing the Greek Catholic confessional identity and serving as a symbolic counterpoint to other religious sects, each of which possesses its own identity markers and charismatic figures.

Following this introduction, the article is organized into three sections. The first section explores the arenas of charisma across two scales of mobilization: the level of sacred spaces and the broader territorial context of Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar, while briefly addressing aspects of memory transmission and devotional practices. In the second section, I provide a more in-depth analysis of these elements, specifically examining the role of Abūnā Bshara’s charisma in shaping the Greek Catholic community. Finally, the third section concentrates on the politico-religious mobilization of this charismatic figure as a means of constructing communal identity and delineating symbolic boundaries with other confessions.⁶

ARENAS OF CHARISMA IN JOUN, ZAHLE, AND DAYR AL-QAMAR

Joun

Joun is a village located in the Chouf Mountains, south of the Mount Lebanon district, approximately 12 km from the city of Sidon and 55 km from Beirut, at an altitude of 406 meters. According to the municipal electoral records, the population is around 9,000, predominantly Greek Catholics, followed by Shia Muslims and Maronites.

The primary institution of the Greek Catholic community in Joun is the *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*, the main monastery of the Salvatorian Order. This monastery is of significant importance not only locally but also nationally and regionally within the Middle East, as it played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Greek-Melkite Catholic Patriarchate of the Middle East in 1724 (Heyberger, 2014). Its most notable feature is its status as one of the central arenas of Abūnā Bshara’s charisma. Beyond being a sacred space where he spent part of his life, the monastery is particularly significant as the site of his tomb, regarded as one of the primary sources of his charismatic power. As Paulo Pinto notes in his study of the holy city of Najaf in Iraq, the tombs of sacred figures are recognized as privileged sources of charismatic power (*baraka*) (Pinto,

⁶ This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Lebanon from November 2016 to May 2023. During several months of fieldwork, I engaged in participant observation within sacred spaces and public areas across these municipalities. Additionally, I conducted formal interviews and participated in numerous conversations with both clergy and lay individuals. I also consulted biographical accounts and audiovisual materials related to Abūnā Bshara.

2017, p. 60-63).

A pivotal moment of devotion at the *maison mère* occurs in front of the tomb of the Greek Catholic monk. As part of the ritual, each devotee enters the church and proceeds directly to the tomb. Usually, the first action is to touch the place where Abūnā Bshara rests, with the intention of receiving his charismatic power through contact. This is followed by prayers or silence to receive the energy devotees attribute to the spiritual presence of this sacred figure. Some even communicate with the monk through a book placed beside the tomb, in which they write words of gratitude for blessings received and make petitions for protection, professional success, or miracles.

While the tomb serves as the primary symbol of Abūnā Bshara's presence within the *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*, it is important to highlight that the entire interior of the monastery is adorned with various other symbols. These include images displayed throughout the convent and personal belongings exhibited in his former cell, all of which evoke his memory and create a sense of connection for devotees with the saint's charisma.

Furthermore, the oral transmission of Abūnā Bshara's charisma plays a crucial role in establishing this monastery as a significant arena of charisma in Joun. First, the creation and dissemination of narratives about the monk's virtues and miracles underscore the recognition of his extraordinary and supernatural qualities. As Max Weber notes, this acknowledgment is a fundamental pillar in the formation of charismatic authority (Weber, 2015 [1922]). Second, belief in these narratives fosters the integration of religious identities linked to this charismatic figure. Lastly, these narratives shape both individual and collective devotional practices within this sacred space.

Outside the *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*, a series of images are displayed on the main door, at the adjacent Salvatorian school, and along the one-kilometer stretch of road leading to both institutions. The transmission of Abūnā Bshara's memory through material culture, coupled with the surrounding landscape of pine and olive trees, deepens the connection felt by both monks and laypeople to Joun, the Salvatorian *maison mère*, and, most importantly, to this charismatic figure. During my fieldwork, I often walked this road with monks, many of whom expressed a profound sense of the saint's spiritual presence.

In downtown Joun, another significant arena of charisma is evident in the enlarged photographs that adorn the exteriors and interiors of numerous homes. This recognition of the extraordinary and supernatural qualities of this Greek Catholic "saint"⁷ extends beyond domestic spaces, permeating the entire village. This devotion, which extends beyond the sacred

⁷ I use the term "saint" in quotation marks because Abūnā Bshara has not yet officially been bestowed with this title within the Catholic Church.

realm, demonstrates how charisma is diffused throughout various parts of Joun, creating what Hansen and Verkaaik (2009) describe as “urban charisma”—a phenomenon in which religious, social, or political charisma becomes woven into the everyday life of the community.

In conversations with locals on the streets and in small shops (*dkekin*), it became clear that everyone was familiar with Abūnā Bshara. Many shared elements of his biography and expressed their devotion to him. Notably, the belief in his charismatic power and the practice of devotion extend beyond the Greek Catholic community, reaching individuals of different faiths. For instance, a Shia couple I met in a local small shop (*dekkén*) shared their knowledge of the saint’s life and mentioned that they prayed for his intercession, whether at home or during occasional visits to the *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*.

Furthermore, Abūnā Bshara’s charisma extends beyond the borders of Joun, influencing neighboring towns in southern Lebanon. An interlocutor I met at the *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*, originally from Jezzine and of Maronite background, regularly visits the monastery because of his connection to this sacred space and his devotion to Abūnā Bshara. He explained that his awareness of the monastery and its patron saint originated in Jezzine, where, despite the Maronite majority, the Salvatorian monk is well-known.

Zahle

The second municipality explored in this research is Zahle, situated in eastern Lebanon, approximately 55 km from Beirut. With a population of around 150,000, it is the second largest city in the country, after Beirut. The demographic majority is Greek Catholic, followed by Maronite and Greek Orthodox (Allegrini, 2022, p. 126).

In Zahle, the Greek Catholic community is home to several places of worship affiliated with the Greek Catholic Archdiocese, notably the Marian shrine *Sayyidat al-Zahle* (Our Lady of Zahle), one of the primary pilgrimage and visitation centers in the country. Unlike Joun, where the community is predominantly Salvatorian, Zahle boasts a strong presence of both the Salvatorian and Chouerite⁸ Orders. Together, these monastic institutions represent the most significant orders of this confession in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the diaspora (Cruz, 2022).⁹

8 Similar to the Salvatorian Order, the Chouerite is a Basilian-style monastic community affiliated with the Greek Catholic community of the Middle East, with its headquarters located in Lebanon. Established in 1700, Chouerites, like the Salvatorians, played a role in the establishment of then Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate in 1724. Its *maison mère* is the *Dayr Mar Yūḥannā* (Saint John Baptist Monastery), situated in the municipality of Khenchara, within the Metn district of Mount Lebanon. Its official name in English is “Basilian Chouerite Order of Saint John the Baptist.” In Arabic its name is *Rahbaniyya al-Shuwayriyya*.

9 Indeed, this city serves as a microcosm of the Greek Catholic presence across Lebanon, characterized by the coexistence of various community institutions such as the archdiocese, religious orders, and social institutions. Additionally, the diversity of sacred spaces including monasteries, churches, and pilgrimage sanctuaries further illustrates the multifaceted nature of this community presence in the region.

While the Chouerite Order holds a significant position among the Greek Catholic institutions in Zahle because of its historical relevance, social institutions, and sacred spaces, the Archdiocese and the Salvatorian Order command additional respect. This is particularly true for the Archdiocese due to the fervent devotion at the *Sayyidat al-Zahle*, and for the Salvatorian Order because of the prominence of the *Bayt Abūnā Bshara* (Abūnā Bshara's house) and the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās Mukhalliṣieh* (Saint Elijah Salvatorian Church). The intensity of this devotion is reflected in the substantial presence of devotees, especially during key religious events, as well as in the emotional dimensions of the devotional practices and ritual performances.

The devotional intensity at the *Bayt Abūnā Bshara* and the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās Mukhalliṣieh* is closely linked to the belief in the spiritual presence of the Salvatorian monk and his charisma. The house is significant because it served as his family home from his birth until he moved to Joun, where he began his monastic career at *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ*. Today, his former residence functions as a museum, preserving the original layout of the rooms and the objects from his time. This sacred site not only conveys the memory of his childhood and youth, but also features an exhibition of images displayed throughout the space, designated prayer areas in some rooms, and a candle-lighting area on the porch.

Visits to the museum and individual acts of devotion are a regular occurrence in this sacred space, as the *Bayt Abūnā Bshara* is open every day of the week. Devotees often begin by lighting a candle on the porch and then proceed to explore the rooms that replicate the original layout of the house, eventually arriving at the prayer rooms to spend a few moments in communion with this charismatic figure. Some visitors, upon entering the site, go directly to the prayer rooms, spend a few minutes in reflection, and then depart.

In addition to material culture, Abūnā Bshara's charisma is actively mobilized in this house-museum through narratives shared by various devotees who frequent the site. These stories are conveyed with notable regularity, clarity, and credibility by a select group of individuals whom I call "charisma specialists," drawing inspiration from the concept of "urban specialists" proposed by Thomas Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik (2009, p. 16). What distinguishes these narratives mobilized in the house is that the specialists are laypeople, whereas, in most situations observed during my fieldwork, the charisma specialists associated with this saint are typically members of the clergy, particularly from the Salvatorian Order.

Among these lay specialists, three individuals stand out. One is the caretaker of this sacred space, responsible for overseeing activities and welcoming devotees and visitors. For newcomers, he often provides guided tours of the memorial site, recounting in detail the life of the Greek Catholic monk, highlighting his heroic virtues and miracles. The other two specialists are devout attendees of both the *Bayt Abūnā Bshara* and the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās Mukhalliṣieh*. They are respected figures within the devotional community, holding significant

authority among their peers due to their deep knowledge of the charismatic biography of the future saint and their personal experiences of witnessing his presence in dreams and visions. Additionally, they have played a crucial role in revitalizing this sacred space and transforming it into a significant site of memory and devotion.

In the church, the transmission of memory and devotional practices related to Abūnā Bshara Abou Mourad occurs through images displayed both in the courtyard and in the church itself. During Sunday services, priests frequently highlight the extraordinary qualities of this charismatic figure, emphasizing his role as a model of Christian conduct. In response, devotees offer prayers before his images and share stories of the saint's virtues and miracles, similar to practices observed in his house. Notably, the same charisma specialists mentioned earlier are active in this religious space as well, disseminating knowledge of their leader's charismatic power to a broader audience.

Indeed, one could argue that the area of just a few meters in the western part of Zahle, encompassing the *Bayt Abūnā Bshara* and the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās Mukhalliṣieh*, serves as the epicenter of the Salvatorian monk's charismatic power. This assertion is based on the fact that he was born and raised in this region, which now stands as the primary hub for the preservation and transmission of his memory and devotional practices. Additionally, the spiritual presence of this sacred figure is not confined to the material objects within these two sacred spaces; his charisma extends throughout the neighborhood, as evidenced by the devotional acts of local residents as they pass by each site.

Finally, the charisma of Abūnā Bshara extends to various parts of the city through the display of images of the future Greek Catholic saint. This begins with those featured in other Salvatorian churches and in the *Sayyidat al-Zahle*. In addition, the presence of this charismatic monk is manifested in images scattered throughout the urban landscape, particularly along the banks of the Berdawni River in downtown. Similar to Joun, devotion to this charismatic figure also occurs in the private homes of Christian families, where images and prayer cards are displayed both inside and outside their homes. This widespread devotion beyond religious spaces bestows an aura of sanctity upon the city and contributes to the recognition of Zahle as a place deeply infused with the charismatic power of the Salvatorian monk.

Dayr al-Qamar

The third and last municipality influenced by the charisma of Abūnā Bshara Abou Mourad is Dayr al-Qamar. Situated in the Chouf district of Mount Lebanon, this municipality lies in the central-southern part of the country, at an altitude of 800 meters and approximately 40 kilometers from the capital Beirut. The population is predominantly Maronite (Traboulsi, 2007, p. 232), with the Greek Catholic community representing the most significant minority

confession.

Despite being a minority, this community holds considerable religious significance in Dayr al-Qamar, largely due to the presence of two historic sacred sites in the central area: the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās* (Saint Elijah Church) and the *Kniseh Sayyidat al-Fakira* (Our Lady of Poverty Church). Beyond their historical importance, these churches are noteworthy as the places where Abūnā Bshara served as a parish priest during the thirty years he lived in this municipality.

These two sacred spaces, located just a few meters apart, represent the heart of Abūnā Bshara's charismatic influence, particularly the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās*, which served as his residence in Dayr al-Qamar and the primary site of his priesthood. According to biographies and oral traditions, it was in this church that he celebrated the most significant religious services, including Sunday Mass, as well as fulfilling other duties such as hearing confessions and teaching catechism. In contrast, the smaller *Kniseh Sayyidat al-Fakira* was used primarily for weekday services, which attracted fewer attendees.¹⁰

In Dayr al-Qamar, Abūnā Bshara's charisma extended to neighboring villages through his dedicated missionary work in the region, particularly in Wadi al-Dayr, where he celebrated religious services and heard confessions in people's homes. He played a pivotal role in the construction of the Sayyidat al Bshara Church, which became the official place of worship for the local community (Sabbagh, 2000, p. 112-127). The sacrifices inherent in Abūnā Bshara's itinerant routine between Dayr al-Qamar and its surroundings are among the virtues most esteemed by my local interlocutors as markers of his sanctity. Both local accounts and his main biographies indicate that this charismatic leader undertook all his journeys on foot, often walking for hours under the sun or rain to fulfill his duties.

To underscore the extraordinary nature of these virtues, Abūnā Naaman, the current parish priest of the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās* and *Kniseh Sayyidat al-Fakira*, invited me to retrace the route that the "saint" would typically walk between Dayr al-Qamar and the neighboring villages. However, he chose to drive instead. When I inquired why we were not walking, he replied, "It's too far; we would be walking for hours here—only Abūnā Bshara could do it."¹¹ This response emphasized the notion that the Salvatorian monk possessed qualities beyond those of ordinary individuals.

The dynamic of my interview with Abūnā Naaman offers an intriguing point of reflection. Rather than conducting the conversation in a fixed location, he chose to move around the region near Dayr al-Qamar. Just as Abūnā Bshara traveled through neighboring villages, visiting people and churches, we followed a similar path. Abūnā Naaman aimed to replicate the routes

¹⁰ Presently, religious services are split between the two churches, maintaining the same arrangement as before.

¹¹ Author's interview conducted in May 2023.

typically taken by the Salvatorian monk, and as we discussed this charismatic figure, we visited some devotees in their homes and stopped by several churches where he had served during his time in the Chouf region.

On another occasion, the priest maintained the same mobile dynamic, this time exploring the city of Dayr al-Qamar. As soon as I arrived at our meeting point in front of the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās*, he began discussing about Abūnā Bshara while inviting me to walk around the church. As we meandered through the city's characteristic alleys, he explained that the "saint" had a daily routine of walking these paths to visit people, hear confessions, and administer communion to those unable to attend church. During our walk, we passed by the *Kniseh Sayyidat al-Fakira*, where we continued the interview. Finally, we returned to the first church, concluding our circuit.

In both formal interviews and informal conversations with Abūnā Naaman, he exhibited a profound understanding of the saint's charisma. During our discussions in the sacred spaces of Dayr al-Qamar and in the villages of Wadi al-Dayr, Dayr al-Dourit, and Serej Bal, this parish priest shared detailed insights into the Salvatorian monk's biography. He often pointed out locations he had visited and objects he had touched, creating an immersive experience of being in the saint's charismatic presence. Abūnā Naaman frequently highlighted the monk's supernatural qualities, emphasizing the asceticism reflected in his long journeys throughout the region, as well as his charitable works and miracles.

Both Abūnā Naaman and several other interlocutors from Dayr al-Qamar proudly asserted in their narratives that the Salvatorian monk's virtues were more prominently displayed in this region than in Joun and Zahle, since he spent the majority of his life here. In these accounts, Dayr al-Qamar and its surroundings are regarded as sacred spaces, preserving the memory of the monk and maintaining a direct connection to both the urban and rural areas he traversed.

Consequently, the sharing of these memories among local residents has played a crucial role in shaping charismatic authority in the region. All the interlocutors I engaged with during my fieldwork in Dayr al-Qamar demonstrated knowledge of Abūnā Bshara, claiming to have inherited these stories from their ancestors. When I inquired about their familiarity with these narratives, the response was immediate: "We are from Dayr al-Qamar; everyone here knows—he lived here for a long time."

Moreover, similar to the other municipalities discussed in this article, Dayr al-Qamar and its surroundings serve as arenas of charisma through the transmission of the saint's memory via material culture. In the *Kniseh Mar Īlyās*, for example, a statue of this charismatic leader is prominently displayed in the entrance courtyard, along with images located inside the church, the meeting hall, and the parish residence. Devotees often express their reverence for the Salvatorian monk in front of these representations.

ARENAS OF CHARISMA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GREEK CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

Memory

A key starting point for analyzing the impact of Abūnā Bshara's charisma on the formation of the Greek Catholic community is the fundamental role of memory. In previous work, I examined how the organization of collective memory within this confession serves as an identity marker for the political-religious community, highlighting the transmission of Abūnā Bshara's memory in *Almukhalliṣ* as a crucial aspect of this process (Cruz, 2022, p. 38-41). In this article, I focus on the collective memory of the Salvatorian monk through its charismatic dimension, which is transmitted across various arenas and, in practice, helps to shape the Greek Catholic community in Lebanon.

The transmission of this charismatic collective memory occurs in both material forms (images, objects) and immaterial forms (oral and written accounts). Starting with the immaterial, Abūnā Bshara's legacy is preserved and perpetuated through the narratives of clerics and laypeople, who emphasize his extraordinary virtues of asceticism, charity, miracles, and evangelistic efforts. In the Christian context, these virtues are commonly recognized as criteria for sainthood (Weinstein; Bell, 1982, p. 139 *apud* Van-Doorn-Harder, 1995, p. 160). Thus, members of the Greek Catholic community highlight these virtues both in formal settings, such as the canonization process with the Vatican, and in their everyday storytelling.

In the material realm, this legacy is embodied in personal items such as garments, accessories, and furniture, primarily displayed in the museums of *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ* in Joun and his former residence in Zahle. Furthermore, images of Abūnā Bshara are dispersed throughout sacred spaces and across the territories of Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar. Together with these objects, the images not only commemorate his life but also perpetuate his spiritual presence, following the tradition common in Byzantine and Eastern Christian practices.

It is important to note that the images of Abūnā Bshara differ from traditional Greek Catholic iconography. Instead of the typical Byzantine-style icons, they consist of enlarged photographs, realistic paintings, or framed statues intended for devotion, reflecting an influence of Latin or Western forms of religiosity within Greek Catholic practices (Mahieu, 2010). Despite this shift toward a more Latin-Occidental style, these images are still venerated by devotees through a Byzantine and Eastern understanding of sacred imagery, where they are seen not merely as representations but as embodiments of the spiritual presence of the prototype (Hanganu, 2010).

The transmission of this sacred legacy through the “mediation of objects and images”

(Latour, 2007) not only strengthens the sense of the Salvatorian monk's spiritual presence but also supports Stanley Tambiah's argument that devotees believe a sacred figure's charismatic power can be transferred to material culture. In his study of the cult of forest monk-saints in Thailand, Tambiah contends that these saints are perceived as capable of imbuing objects with their charisma, transforming them into repositories of spiritual power (Tambiah, 1984, p. 335).

Thus, this charismatic collective memory plays a crucial role in shaping the Greek Catholic community. Maurice Halbwachs defines "collective memory" as the shared remembrances of human groups within specific social contexts. He further argues that in passing down these recollections, communities aim to foster a collective consciousness while also ensuring their continuity and stability amidst the passage of time and social change (Halbwachs, 1968 [1950]).

In his analysis of religious communities, Halbwachs emphasizes key elements that inform our understanding of the arenas of charisma associated with Abūnā Bshara: spatiality and materiality. He argues that a religious group's collective memory is intricately linked to its physical spaces and the material objects within them. Moreover, the thoughtful arrangement of images and objects in sacred spaces and territories imbues them with meaning, facilitating the integration of memory and shaping the community's identity (Halbwachs, 1968 [1950], p. 92-93).

Furthermore, the integration of this collective memory leads both clerics and laypeople to recognize Abūnā Bshara as an ethical model worthy of imitation. As Andreas Bandak notes, sanctified figures serve as exemplary models whose religious, social, and moral virtues provide a reference for the personal character of the faithful and their everyday practices (Bandak, 2015, p. 47-64). The adoption of these virtues, particularly through the narratives shared in the sermons of the clergy, directly influences individual religious identity. In terms of collective identity, these sanctified virtues function as points of convergence, strengthening connections among community members and fostering cohesion around shared values and ideals (Van Doorn-Harder, 1995; Poujeau, 2014).

During the homilies I attended in the charismatic arenas dedicated to Abūnā Bshara, his exemplary life was frequently invoked as a model of moral conduct. For instance, when the day's Gospel focused on charity, priests often referred to the Salvatorian monk's dedication to the poor in Dayr al-Qamar and the surrounding area, emphasizing his efforts to provide food, clothing, and assistance. One particularly poignant episode recounted by the priests involved Abūnā Bshara removing his own shoes to give to someone in need.

On special occasions, such as the anniversary of his death on February 22, masses are held in honor of Abūnā Bshara in Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar. During these events, the sermons focus almost exclusively on narrating his charismatic journey, emphasizing to the audience—primarily Greek Catholics—that the conduct of this "saint" serves as an example to

be followed. After the mass, it is common to see the faithful recalling parts of the homily that underscores his virtues. At a mass in Zahle attended by approximately 400 people, I observed a group of devotees engaged in lively discussions about Abūnā Bshara's life, celebrating his charismatic qualities and recounting miracles attributed to him, including both episodes from his biography and personal experiences they claimed to have had.

Two interviews I conducted with lay devotees in Zahle demonstrate the impact of Abūnā Bshara's charismatic journey on Greek Catholic discourse. Both individuals recounted having visions of the monk urging them to change their behavior. One interviewee, a man around 60 years old, described seeing the monk at his workplace, advising him to dedicate his life to prayer. The other interviewee, a woman in her 50s, said that she had a vision of the "saint," whom she now refers to as "my father," asking her to commit herself to charity. These accounts underscore that, for these devotees, the authenticity of their visions reinforces the saint's charismatic virtues, which they strive to emulate in their own lives.

These ethnographic situations illustrate how the virtues associated with Abūnā Bshara are embodied in everyday life, reinforcing the Greek Catholic community not only as a faith group but also as a social network interconnected by shared values. By transforming Bshara's charisma into an ethical and spiritual guide, the faithful shape their own lives while strengthening the bonds that unite them as a community. In this way, devotion to the charismatic leader transcends the personal sphere, becoming part of an ongoing process of constructing and reinforcing collective identity.

Devotional Rituals

This second analysis aims to illustrate how the devotional rituals honoring Abūnā Bshara, situated within the arenas of charisma, nurture and strengthen the Greek Catholic community on different levels. Numerous venues in Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar act as central gathering places for devotees, enriching their sense of belonging and promoting social cohesion.

These rituals can be linked to the two modes of religiosity defined by Harvey Whitehouse: the "doctrinal" and the "imagistic" modes (Whitehouse, 2000).¹² They relate to the doctrinal mode as they are grounded in the doctrines of the Greek Catholic tradition. The masses celebrated in honor of the saint, along with acts of devotion such as the sprinkling of incense before his images and tomb, are integrated into the performance of the Byzantine rite and the

12 "The imagistic mode consists of the tendency, within certain small-scale or regionally fragmented ritual traditions and cults, for revelations to be transmitted through sporadic collective action, evoking multivocal iconic imagery, encoded in memory as distinct episodes, and producing highly cohesive and particularistic social ties. By contrast, the doctrinal mode of religiosity consists of the tendency, within many regional and world religions, for revelations to be codified as a body of doctrines, transmitted through routinized forms of worship, memorized as part of one's "general knowledge", and producing large, anonymous communities" (Whitehouse 2000, p. 1).

liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom¹³. Through these ritual practices, devotees not only express their reverence for the charismatic leader but also strengthen their connection to the larger Greek Catholic community.

Conversely, these rituals also align with the imagistic mode, which is characterized by the intense and sporadic religious experiences that devotees encounter both individually and collectively. On a personal level, moments of contemplation and prayer before the images or tomb of Abūnā Bshara are often described by devotees as profound spiritual connections, marked by feelings of the saint's presence or reports of miracles¹⁴ occurring at the site. These individual experiences not only strengthen personal ties to the saint but also contribute to the formation of a collective Greek Catholic identity. They enhance individual identification with this revered figure while simultaneously deepening communal bonds through the sharing of these experiences in social interactions.

Moreover, sporadic religious experiences of the imagistic mode take place during commemorative masses in honor of the Salvatorian monk. At the *Dayr al-Mukhallis* in Joun, for instance, the emotional atmosphere of these celebrations is particularly striking. Numerous priests and monks from various convents of the Salvatorian Order gather to honor the “saint,” and the effectiveness of the rituals is enhanced by exaltations of his charismatic journey, prayers before his images, and the sprinkling of incense over his tomb, all of which contribute to a spiritually charged environment. This interplay of words and actions creates an atmosphere reminiscent of what Paula Pryce describes as “charismatic energy” (Pryce, 2021).

In Zahle, although the gathering of priests is not as extensive, the emotional intensity remains high, bolstered by the exceptional performance of the choir, which sings songs dedicated to the revered monk, and the enthusiastic participation of a large audience. Similar to the celebrations in Joun, the priests incense the images, filling the space with a fragrance that evokes the “charismatic energy” mentioned above.

In summary, the effectiveness of these rituals stems from a combination of key elements: the veneration of images, tombs, and objects associated with the Salvatorian monk; the fragrant aroma of incense (Forbess, 2015, p. 21); the ritual discourses and actions (Tambiah, 1985); the discipline inherent in the performance (Asad, 1993); and the themes and refrains expressed in the songs (Bandak, 2014). Together, these factors enhance the emotional resonance of the rituals, reinforcing the religious identities of the faithful and solidifying the Greek Catholic community around the charisma of Abūnā Bshara.

¹³ It constitutes the primary liturgical rite observed in the religious services conducted within churches and monasteries of the Greek Catholic tradition in the Middle East, as well as among its representatives in the diaspora.

¹⁴ A notable example is that of a young man who claimed to have witnessed a candle lighting by itself after a prayer in Abūnā Bshara's house, with no one else present.

Confessional Identity and Community Boundaries

On the one hand, Abūnā Bshara's charisma is cultivated and expressed locally—within sacred spaces and municipal territories. On the other hand, this charismatic figure serves as a national symbol for the Greek Catholic community, playing a vital role in defining its boundaries in relation to other confessions within a multi-confessional and sectarian context. This illustrates that charisma is not only rooted in the direct relationship between leader and devotee, as described in the Weberian sense, but also resonates within the cultural and political structures of societies that render its mobilization meaningful (Geertz, 1983), as exemplified in Lebanon.

In Lebanon's multi-confessional and sectarian landscape, where 18 officially recognized Christian and Muslim confessions have historically competed for followers, territorial visibility, and political power (Cammett, 2014; Salloukh *et al.*, 2017), each community employs various strategies to assert its presence and maintain its competitiveness within this "field" (Bourdieu, 1971). A crucial strategy in the construction, assertion, and competition among political-religious communities in Lebanon is the definition of a religious identity.

Within the Christian bloc, which encompasses 12 confessions, this process is particularly pronounced, as many of these communities share doctrinal and ritual similarities. In this context, a well-defined identity not only justifies the community's existence but also plays a crucial role in maintaining its distinctiveness. Furthermore, the establishment of a clear religious identity helps to deter the faithful from attending the sacred spaces of other institutions with similar characteristics, especially in a time when individuals have greater agency in choosing their religious practices (Hervieu-Léger, 2003; Mahieu; Naumescu, 2008, p. 1-33).

I have previously argued (Cruz, 2018; 2022) that the Greek Catholic community has grappled with defining its religious identity since the early years of its Church's founding in 1724. This challenge arises from its ritual tradition, which is shaped by both Byzantine and Catholic normative references (Hachem, 1995). In the Lebanese context, this difficulty is further exacerbated by the need to distinguish itself from the country's major Christian confessions, such as the Maronite Church, with which it shares a Catholic reference, and the Byzantine Church, with which it shares Byzantine norms. To navigate this issue, the clergy highlight the ambiguity of their religiosity as a distinctive marker of their identity, constructing an identity that exists at the intersection of Byzantinism and Catholicism.

In light of these challenges, it is crucial to examine additional elements that contribute to defining religious identity while simultaneously shaping the Greek Catholic community. One such element is the charisma of Abūnā Bshara, which positions him as a community symbol and a diacritical marker that reinforces the identity boundaries between Greek Catholics and other confessions. As Fredrik Barth observed in his study of ethnic group interactions in Pakistan, the

power dynamics between contact groups hinge on the definition of boundaries that help sustain stability in a dynamic context of people and cultural symbols in flux (Barth, 1969).

Thus, within the Lebanese sectarian context, the charisma of Abūnā Bshara serves as a distinctive marker for the Greek Catholic community, while simultaneously positioning this charismatic figure in competition with the more powerful Christian confessions in Lebanon, namely the Maronite and Greek Orthodox. In an interview with Abūnā Naaman in Dayr al-Qamar, he emphasized that the canonization of Abūnā Bshara is vital to the survival of the Greek Catholic community, stating:

Maronites and Orthodox have hospitals, universities, and a large population. The Greek Catholics do not have any of that. Having a canonized saint is a sign that we exist. Moreover, having a saint like him is important for attracting believers and growing our population.¹⁵

Within this sectarian logic, Abūnā Naaman specifically positioned himself in competition with the Maronite community over their saints, particularly Saint Charbel, a prominent identity symbol for the Maronites (Heyberger, 2003). He remarked, “The Maronites have several saints, which helps them attract many believers to their churches. The Greek Catholic community must strive for that as well.”

Additionally, he aimed to highlight the distinctiveness of Abūnā Bshara’s charisma by contrasting the Salvatorian monk with Saint Charbel. He argued that Saint Charbel embodied a purely contemplative ideal, as he spent his life in a convent or hermitage, whereas Abūnā Bshara demonstrated virtue both in monastic life and in his pastoral mission. Through this discourse, the parish priest of Dayr al-Qamar clearly seeks to promote the veneration of the Salvatorian monk within the competitive dynamics for believers that define the Lebanese political-religious landscape.

Another dimension of this competition with the Maronites stems from a discourse that highlights the minority status of the Greek Catholic community in relation to this rival confession. In an interview, one of the Salvatorian priests from Joun pointed out that the delay in the canonization of Abūnā Bshara is because the Greek Catholic community lacks the political and economic clout possessed by the Maronites, who have successfully expedited the canonization of their saints. In this context, this priest, echoing Abūnā Naaman, stressed the urgent need for more effective efforts by the Greek Catholic patriarchate to engage with the Vatican and accelerate the process. At the end of the interview, he emphasized the significance of Abūnā Bshara in shaping Greek Catholic identity by stating:

¹⁵ Author’s interview conducted in June 2022.

He needs to become a saint soon because we no longer have an identity. They even tried to promote the idea that we are a bridge between Catholics and Orthodox, but that doesn't work so well. What defines us is our history and also Abūnā Bshara. However, for him to be accepted throughout the community, he needs to be officially recognized as a saint.¹⁶

In other contexts, the charisma of Abūnā Bshara is mobilized on both national and regional levels, serving as a symbol not only for the Greek Catholic community but also for a broader Christian audience. In my previous work (Cruz, 2022), I highlighted a passage from an interview with former Patriarch Gregorius Laham, who received his religious education at the *Dayr Almuḥalliṣ*. He underscored the importance of canonizing Abūnā Bshara, asserting that Christians need role models to imitate, especially given the oppression faced by their co-religionists in a Muslim-majority context (Dornellas, 2016)¹⁷. Furthermore, I argued in that study—although without delving into the concept of charisma—that while this discourse presents the “Salvatorian monk” as a symbol for all Christians¹⁸, it is inherently tied to the objective of strengthening the Greek Catholic community. It reflects a quest for Christian unity that assumes a political identity as a potential agent in the pursuit of cohesion amid the challenges posed by Muslims.

Thus, the construction of Greek Catholic identity in Lebanon involves not only defining doctrines and practices that distinguish it from other Christian denominations but also mobilizing charismatic figures like Abūnā Bshara on a national scale. By serving as a central symbol of the community's uniqueness, Abūnā Bshara's charisma strengthens Greek Catholic identity and positions the community in ongoing competition with other confessions, such as the Maronite and Greek Orthodox. The quest for the canonization of the Salvatorian monk exemplifies this dynamic, acting as an identity marker that reinforces both communal boundaries and internal cohesion. By integrating religious, social, and political elements, Greek Catholics ensure their

16 Author's interview conducted in May 2022. When this interlocutor emphasizes that the official canonization of Abūnā Bshara is crucial for his acceptance by the entire community, he is particularly addressing the reluctance of the Chouerite Order and the majority of Greek Catholics residing in regions influenced by this monastic community to recognize the sanctity of the Salvatorian monk. In sacred spaces affiliated with the Chouerite Order throughout the country, there is a noticeable absence of images or references to him, and many believers from areas influenced by this monastic community assert that they are unfamiliar with this charismatic figure.

17 Here is the passage: “I am working very hard for the beatification of the Salvatorian monk (like me) Bshara Abou Mourad. He is our Cure d'Ars. He truly lived as a 'Cure of Ars'. He died in 1933 and served in more than twenty small parishes on Mount Lebanon. An intense spirituality and love for the poor define him perfectly. The pope wanted us to deal with the eastern dossiers as quickly as possible because our faithful need models and reasons for hope more than ever” (D'ornellas, 2016, p. 36).

18 The discourse promoting Abūnā Bshara as a symbol of all Christians is part of an effort by leaders of the Greek Catholic community to strengthen their position in the sectarian context of Lebanon. They aim to attract members from other confessions and justify the common multi-confessional Christian presence in their sacred spaces. For more details on this aspect, see Cruz (2018).

visibility and relevance within Lebanon's multi-confessional and sectarian landscape.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the dynamics surrounding the mobilization of the charisma of the Greek Catholic monk Bshara Abou Mourad across various settings in the municipalities of Joun, Zahle, and Dayr al-Qamar. This mobilization occurs primarily through the transmission of his memory, which is perpetuated through both material and immaterial elements, as well as through devotional practices carried out by clergy and laypeople. This complex network of practices and representations not only preserves the legacy of Abou Mourad but also strengthens communal bonds, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity among the faithful.

Furthermore, while Abou Mourad's charisma is mobilized primarily at the local level, its significance extends to the broader Lebanese political-religious landscape, where it serves as a crucial marker of Greek Catholic identity. This is particularly important in reinforcing the community's position in a competitive environment and plays a vital role in defining its boundaries in relation to other confessions within Lebanon's multi-confessional and sectarian framework. By examining charisma across different scales—local, national, and sometimes regional—and through various lenses, such as memorial, devotional, and sectarian perspectives, this article provides valuable insights into understanding charisma beyond Max Weber's original framework.

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