In the late afternoon of 14 October 1597, Frangipani wrote a letter to Sandrino to congratulate his famigliare with his graduation as a bachelor in Law. The nuncio did not omit to mention that he had warmly recommended his client to the two university men who had joined him as table companions. The delegates—one of whom was the Law professor (and Sandrino’s academic patron) Stephanus Weyms—had promised to do everything in their power to advance Sandrino’s honour and glory. Academics had good reasons to cater to the needs of the nuncio’s clientele. For it was not just a succulent meal that had been on the table but also the alarming number of Roman writs against university men seizing benefices by virtue of nomination privileges granted, respectively, in 1483 and 1513 to the University of Louvain and to its Faculty of Arts. Frangipani had courteously abstained from contradicting their “images”; not, however, because he had been a wee bit convinced by hyperbolic statements about privileges without which the Catholic frontier would collapse. The affable prelate, who dressed down academic claims as “voluntary, not necessary,” had endorsed them because of what the academics stood for; because they represented that which was worthy of veneration and exhortation. Apparently, supporting academic claims did not entail believing them. This brings us back to the central problem of this book. How could academics and their overlords hold that privileges which endowed them with a corner of the clerical job market were essential for the survival of the university and of Catholicism in the Low Countries? This question will be tackled in the last section. The path will be paved by two sections which furnish the reader with a synopsis and preliminary conclusions.

“Cum causa voluntaria sit, non necessaria”

A first dichotomy underpinning Frangipani’s letter separates (“futile”) interests and a poorly defined academic role in Society. A Roman

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1 Frangipani to Sandrino, 14 October 1597, ed. Louant, Correspondance, 246–47.
diplomat, the Italian had vented his scepticism about academic jurisdiction in the first place, but his question marks can easily be extrapolated to the privileges of nomination. Benefices, in this view, were part of the so-called “structures of science” that supported, but did not affect, an inner core of learning and/or religious beliefs. Obtained via the privileges or otherwise, they were replaceable, “voluntaria,” as a means of financing. The energy going into the defence of academic claims in the field, and the existence of alternative channels of employment for graduates, suggest that these somewhat anachronistic privileges in a Tridentine Age should have been ditched in favour of more modern financing techniques that would allow academics to attend to their core business. Leaving aside the question of whether anomalies of this type should retain our attention, one wonders whether material interests are the best line of approach to religious phenomena, the obligatory excursions to the realm of theological controversy and pastoral theories notwithstanding. The debates over Justification, papal primacy, or sacramental practice are ultimately irreducible to conflicts over benefices.

This book subscribes to the need to avoid reductionist interpretations making learning and religion the plaything of external forces. It firmly rejects, however, the internalist implication that this legitimises building, a priori, all kinds of boundaries between supposedly distinct spheres of human activity. It is more rewarding to investigate how dichotomies such as the one in Frangipani’s letter materialised and could thrive, rather than to interrupt artificially the flow that brought us from benefices, to grants, college life, spirituality, and ecclesiastical hierarchy, to earthly and heavenly Grace, Augustine, sacraments, and back again. The assumptions underlying this book and the applied methods were designed to capture these hybrid, networked realities and the multitudes of actors involved in them. By going back to the laboratories of Society, Power, and Truth, we could observe academics “in action,” just before they became the indispensable instruments of a transcendental logic. The result was a de-centred, bottom-up approach that capitalised on the heterogeneity and multiplicity of early modern Catholicism in order to reconstruct the continuous negotiations of chains of actors wondering how to act as one. In this approach, medieval privileges could stop figuring as baffling anomalies and obstacles to “Trent” or other “trends” diffusing themselves over Christendom, and became a passage point to the academic world instead.