

Cardinal-designate O'Brien used to new and varied assignments

WASHINGTON - The priestly ministry of Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, named a cardinal Jan. 6 by Pope Benedict XVI, has been marked by frequent assignments, so that he rarely stays in one place very long. And even when he is ensconced somewhere for a while, he gets to moving.

Appointed last August as pro-grand master of the Equestrian Order (Knights) of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, based in Rome, he is serving simultaneously in his previous post as archbishop of Baltimore until a successor is named.

Born April 8, 1939, in New York, Edwin Frederick O'Brien and his family were members of Our Lady of Solace Parish in the Bronx. He attended St. Joseph's Seminary outside New York, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1961 and master's degrees in 1964 and 1965. In 1965, he was ordained to the priesthood, setting off a string of appointments.

For his first five years as a priest, he was a civilian chaplain at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. He became an Army chaplain in 1970 and over the next three years rose to the rank of captain while ministering to the 82nd Airborne.

He served a tour of duty in Vietnam from 1971 to 1972 with the 173rd Airborne Brigade and then 1st Cavalry Brigade. From a base of operations in the middle of a jungle, he and a Protestant minister flew by helicopter to defensive outposts, where they would provide for the spiritual needs of soldiers.

From 1973 to 1976, he studied at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, earning a doctorate in theology. On his return to New York, he was named archdiocesan vice chancellor and assistant pastor of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Appointed archdiocesan director of communications in 1981, he helped launch Catholic New York, the archdiocesan newspaper. Two years later, he was named secretary to New York Cardinal Terence Cooke and later to Cardinal John J. O'Connor, his successor in New York.

Then-Monsignor O'Brien was made rector of St. Joseph's Seminary in 1985 and rector of the Pontifical North American College in Rome in 1989. On his return to New York in 1994, he was again made rector of St. Joseph's.

He was named an auxiliary bishop of New York Feb. 6, 1996, and ordained a bishop March 25. He was named coadjutor archbishop of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services in April 1997. He took up the post in May and became head of the archdiocese in August when Archbishop Joseph T. Dimino resigned for health reasons. It was the cardinal-designate's longest single appointment, but he made a point of getting out of the office to visit chaplains at bases, including a two-month tour in 2007.

As military archbishop, he had to deal with dwindling numbers of Catholic chaplains. In 2003, there were 367 chaplains for 1.5 million Catholics in all branches of the military.

In 2005-06, Cardinal-designate O'Brien served as the papally appointed coordinator for the visitation of U.S. seminaries and houses of priestly formation.

As the visitation began, he said there was no room in seminaries for men with strong homosexual inclinations even if they have been celibate for a decade or more. "I think anyone who has engaged in homosexual activity, or has strong homosexual inclinations, would be best not to apply to a seminary and not to be accepted into a seminary," he said, later adding that he was speaking for himself based on his prior stints as a seminary rector, not for the U.S. bishops or the Vatican

He got to dedicate a new headquarters building for the military archdiocese in September 2007, mere days before his installation as archbishop of Baltimore.

But about four years later, he was on his way to Rome to head the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, dedicated to supporting the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and to responding to the needs of Catholics in the Holy Land. Its work covers Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus. The Knights fund seminaries, schools, hospitals and social centers throughout the patriarchate.

Cardinal-designate O'Brien succeeded another U.S. prelate, the late Cardinal John P.

Foley, in the post.

In 2009, as Baltimore archbishop, he told an audience of 500 people gathered for a military-sponsored symposium in Omaha, Neb., that the abolition of nuclear weapons was an issue of “fundamental moral values that should unite people across national and ideological boundaries.”

The following year, in Paris, he said the path to the elimination of nuclear weapons will be “long and treacherous,” but humanity “must walk this path with both care and courage in order to build a future free of the nuclear threat.”

Last summer, he had an exchange of letters urging Maryland Gov. Martin J. O'Malley, a Catholic, not to sponsor legislation legalizing same-sex marriage. “As advocates for the truths we are compelled to uphold,” the future cardinal wrote, “we speak with equal intensity and urgency in opposition to your promoting a goal that so deeply conflicts with your faith, not to mention the best interests of our society.”

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