

Cardinal Foley calls trip to Holy Land inspiring, informative

VATICAN CITY - U.S. Cardinal John P. Foley said his first trip to the Holy Land as grand master of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher was “both inspiring and informative.”

While he was struck by the “very distressing” living conditions of Bethlehem’s residents and the restrictions on some seminarians’ freedom to travel, he was also touched by the enthusiasm and faith of the area’s Christians, the cardinal told Catholic News Service Jan. 18.

His Jan. 7-13 trip to Jerusalem, the West Bank, Jordan and “all the major shrines” was “a great joy” and “very necessary for me in my new job.”

Pope Benedict XVI named Cardinal Foley pro-grand master of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher in June. The chivalric organization is dedicated to supporting the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and to responding to the needs of Catholics in the Holy Land.

The 72-year-old Philadelphia native had not been to the Holy Land since 1977, he said, “and what a way to go as cardinal, I must say.”

He met with numerous bishops, dignitaries, and local Christians and helped celebrate Mass at a number of venues, including at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which, the cardinal said, was a very moving experience “especially given my new job.”

In meetings with local pastors, the priests “were very clear and forthright” in

outlining what aid they had received from the chivalric order and what now were their most urgent needs, the cardinal said.

Their No. 1 priority, he said, was additional funding for Catholic schools.

“The cost of living is going up and they can’t afford to give raises to the teachers,” he said.

He said Catholic school officials “don’t want to lose their teachers” – some of whom are leaving to work in better-paid public schools.

The schools are crucial for helping the minority Christians “maintain a Christian identity,” Cardinal Foley said. Since Latin-rite Catholics, Melkite Catholics, Greek Orthodox and even Muslims attend the schools, these institutions also foster understanding and peace in multifaith communities, he said.

Seeing how people in Bethlehem, West Bank, were affected by the Israeli security barrier “was very, very distressing,” he said. Some people cannot access their land on the other side of the barrier, a series of concrete slabs and barbed-wire fences, and while Israeli settlements have sprung up on contested lands.

“They’re very unhappy, Christians and Muslims alike,” he said.

The cardinal said he was struck by how enthusiastic and strong in their faith the Christians of Zerka, Jordan, were. Meeting with and celebrating Mass for “the descendents of the first Christians” was very inspiring, he said.

He said he also was impressed by “the quality of the students and enthusiasm” of the seminarians in Beit Jalla near Bethlehem, despite “the frustration of not being able to return home for Christmas.” Visa restrictions had prevented nearly half the students from leaving the West Bank for the holidays, he said.