



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“Let us bear witness to the good work the Church does, far from the media spotlight.”

Interview with Cardinal Fernando Filoni to mark the 25th anniversary of his episcopate, March 19, 2026



Eminence, on the anniversary of your 25 years of Episcopacy this March 19, 2026, what is your particular act of thanksgiving?

On March 19, twenty-five years ago, Pope John Paul II, in the presence of other ecclesiastics, consecrated me a bishop. In addition, this day is also the anniversary of when the Holy Father appointed me as his diplomatic representative to Iraq and Jordan. Before my episcopal consecration, I had just completed my time in Hong Kong, where I had spent eight years learning to love and to know the Church in China, which was emerging at that time from many years of suffering and martyrdom. While there, I met many men and women who had borne witness as confessors of the faith, and about many others of whom I had heard of and had read about their martyrdom. Therefore, it was also a period in which I gave thanks to God for having permitted me to come to know this scarcely known reality; in fact, very little was known at the time. I had come to know it deeply because I had direct contact with those who had suffered, and access to written accounts of the highest spiritual and ecclesial value, which reached me after decades of immense hardship. Therefore, prior to my appointment, I had already had an extremely important experience, which was profoundly marked by faith through the testimony of these men and women, religious brothers and sisters, and clergy and laity who had suffered under Chinese communism. When Pope John Paul II chose me for the episcopate, it was difficult to say “no”. At times, I reflected on what Saint Augustine notably said, “It is more important to be worthy of bearing the weight of the episcopate than to be a bishop” (*Sermon 340/A*). What he means here is that there is an immense responsibility that accompanies this position, and on a human level, we consider ourselves humanly, culturally, spiritually, and pastorally inadequate. I was also extremely fond of something else St Augustine had said, and, as if in conversation, I

would say to him, “Yes, but you accepted”; and in reply he seems to say: “I cannot withdraw from the voice of God”. After a few days’ reflection, I accepted because there was no escaping the logic of obedience and the papal call, nor the fullness of the priestly ministry. After some time, I left Hong Kong and prepared myself for this new adventure as a bishop and as the papal representative to Iraq and Jordan. These were complex countries because, at that time, although Jordan was peaceful, it needed our support as the Christian presence there was small. Iraq, on the other hand, was a country with a recent past full of turmoil, with small *sui juris* Churches, whilst the majority of the population was Muslim, either Shia or Sunni.

Can you recall the formative years of your youth and tell us who the priestly and pastoral role models were that you looked up to?

My vocation took root in my home region of Puglia, during an extraordinarily significant period in the life of the universal Church. This was the period following Pius XII, when Pope John XXIII and, above all, the Second Vatican Council were stirring up a great deal of excitement. In that period at the seminary, we did not speak during either lunch or dinner, except on Sundays; but we read and listened to reports of the Council. In a certain sense, even though we were young and did not participate directly in the Council, we were immersed in it because we followed all the events, while trying to understand them as best we could given their theological and social complexity. We paid close attention to the news reports and discussed the important theologians, who aroused in us a serious desire to get to know them. I remember that for me personally it was a very important period in which I came to know the Church. It was no coincidence, then, that when I had to choose my episcopal motto, the words *‘Lumen gentium Christus’* (*Christ is the light of the nations*) came to mind, which are the first three words of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from the Second Vatican Council. Later, after the Council, whilst studying theology, we found ourselves sitting on the very same benches used by the Council Fathers, which the Holy See, having cleared St Peter’s Basilica, distributed amongst the Italian seminaries. As for the people from that period of my formation, I remember above all a spiritual director who, at a crucial juncture in my life, helped me enormously to discern what I should do. That spiritual director was instrumental in my decision on whether or not to continue; I was eighteen at the time. Among the figures in the Church, I recall the extraordinary human qualities of Popes such as Saint John XXIII, and the intellectual acumen and inner suffering of a man such as Paul VI. However, I looked to ordinary parish priests who lived unassuming lives and were always ready to serve their local parishes day in, day out. I was deeply fascinated by missionary life, which I seriously considered as an alternative.

Saint Paul VI played a special role in your life. In what way did he have the greatest impact on you, and which of the Church’s virtues did this man uphold that inspired you most?

At that time, when I was young, first a seminarian and then a priest, Paul VI embodied the deep restlessness of a Church in a world that was undergoing radical change. Paul VI was a man who was deeply troubled; on the one hand, he had the foundation of the Council to guide both him and the Church; on the other, these were the times in a world that seemed to be drifting away, and this was a source of torment for him. In addition, there were the crises within the Church, with clergy and religious abandoning their vocation and laypeople dreaming of political paths that were contrary to the living tradition of the Church’s doctrine. I was struck very deeply by Paul VI’s humility. The Pope was suffering greatly; we were all aware of this, and the Church’s pastoral outlook seemed to be yielding no results. Nor should we forget that the world of young people was in turmoil and morality itself seemed almost to have been rejected. The way of being part of the Church was also changing, when it was no longer out of obligation, but by vocational choice.

Did you know Saint Paul VI personally?

No, I never actually met him myself, even though I was a priest in Rome and followed his work to some extent. At that time, I lived near the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, and those were very intense times because, for example, right there in the Basilica was Abbot Giovanni Franzoni, who was challenging a whole range of ways of being the Church. In his view, the Church had to become populist, and draw closer to the political left. This was a vision in which historical-theological tradition had to give way to the popular theology that was emerging from Latin America.

Those were the extremely difficult years of the Red Brigades. During those years, I was teaching at a classical grammar school in Rome and witnessed the suffering, the problems and the hardships faced by families. In addition, there were the violent protests of certain politicized student groups who opposed everything and everyone. On occasion, I had to go to court to defend our pupils who had been arrested by the police during street protests. Instead, the actual protesters and instigators of the violence would vanish from view to leave the young people to face the consequences of the aggressive demonstrations.

The pastoral crisis of that period was also extremely severe, and churches were beginning to empty out. Young people were not joining traditional groups; there was strong opposition to the faith, and it was necessary to start devising a new form of pastoral care, which would be better suited to the human and social realities of young people and the parishes themselves.

What can you share with us about your first years of service in Sri Lanka, Iran, and Brazil? Are there people and encounters that have remained in your heart?

I found myself involved in the diplomatic service of the Holy See because I had completed my studies in Rome. After eight years, the bishop told me, "It is time to return to the diocese". My diocese was in Nardò, in the Province of Lecce. When I went to take leave of the Pope's Vicar for Rome, Cardinal Ugo Poletti, he said to me, "But look, in your diocese there are many priests, and the Secretariat of State is asking me to identify people who could carry out the diplomatic service that they need". I replied, "Of course, but it is up to my bishop to decide". My bishop willingly agreed that I should begin this service. Since I already had academic qualifications, my juridical and diplomatic preparation was reduced to just two years, which at the time was the minimum required by the norms. After that, my first mission was to Sri Lanka, which was assigned to me in May 1981, just a few days before the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. I became secretary of the nunciature. This was an extremely interesting experience, because the number of Catholics in Sri Lanka is small, about 7-7% of the population. The majority of the population is Buddhist, with large Hindu and Muslim minorities. For me this was a kind of school, a training ground for getting to know religious experiences that were completely different and very interesting. I had a very good nuncio, who was a generous-hearted man who had a positive view of these religions, and there I began to learn about these new realities. Sri Lanka is a fascinating country both from a natural and a social point of view, but it is also a difficult one because of divisions between the Sinhalese (Buddhist), Tamil (Hindu), and Moors (Muslim) ethnic groups. Christians belonged both to the Sinhalese and to the Tamil ethnic groups. However, there were significant tensions between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and the Hindu Tamils. During that period, these tensions erupted into armed clashes and eventually into an actual war that lasted twenty-seven years, which claimed the lives of many thousands. I found myself there at the beginning of that long period of violence and witnessed immense suffering, which included people being killed, houses burned, arrests, curfews, and so on. On one occasion, I found myself in an extremely delicate situation. I remember that a Sister who was accompanying me said that we had risked our lives at a

road checkpoint because of the curfew that we had not been able to respect, because we had been trying to help people in difficulty. My three years there had been a school that has lasted, where I came to know a very beautiful and welcoming country with many good people, but also what hatred and violence mean.

What do you recall from your time in Iran?

I went to Iran immediately after Sri Lanka in 1983, and spent two years there. The country was shaken by the Khomeinist revolution; and even in Tehran, life was very difficult. Christians were truly few in number, in fact, just a few thousand. Above all, there was the Iran-Iraq War, with all the hardships and dangers of a conflict that lasted eight years. Every night Iraqi planes bombed the country, and the anti-aircraft guns made an infernal noise to prevent the fighter-bombers from reaching their targets. I remember that the nuncio, who was a man of great charm, would say, "I'm not going to hide in the basement; I don't want to die like a rat, I'd rather die in my bed". This may seem a humorous remark, but it reveals the necessity of facing the situation with a bit of humor and trust in the goodness of God. Sometimes I would go up to the terrace to try to understand where the shooting and bombings were occurring. This was a bit reckless of me because shells were falling everywhere. In a way, one learned to experience the same dramatic reality as the *Iraqis*, and how much they suffered! So many thousands of deaths! While in Iraq, I also began to learn about the Muslim world and in particular the Shiite community, with its practices and customs, which were very different from those in the West, and from the Sunni community too. Iran, which is a beautiful country, was at that time in strong opposition to the United States, whose embassy was under siege. Ayatollah Khomeini was alive, and the Islamic Republic was consolidating. The nunciature was closely watched, but we were able to live prudently and, I would say, without too much difficulty. However, several Church educational institutions had been confiscated, and pastoral activity focused on the traditional faithful (Chaldeans, Armenians, and Latins). Nonetheless, the surveillance was strict.



After Iran you moved to the Secretariat of State. How did you experience that period?

At the Secretariat of State, I worked with international organizations, including the United Nations, and the whole network of institutions in which the Holy See participated either as a member or as an observer. Those were formative years in multilateral diplomacy; and I was fascinated by the major issues of the 1980s. For example, the “issue of women and the family” was emerging, and John Paul II wanted immense attention to be paid to it. Another issue was the persecution of the Church in communist countries in Europe and Asia, and he wanted to be well informed about what was happening. From time to time, he would invite us to lunch so as to hear from us about how things were going. I must admit that I could hardly eat, partly out of emotion, and partly because I wanted to listen carefully to the Holy Father’s thought and to that of my superiors. My four years in the Secretariat of State were very intense; then the Substitute changed, and his successor proposed that I go to Brazil.

How did your time in Brazil unfold?

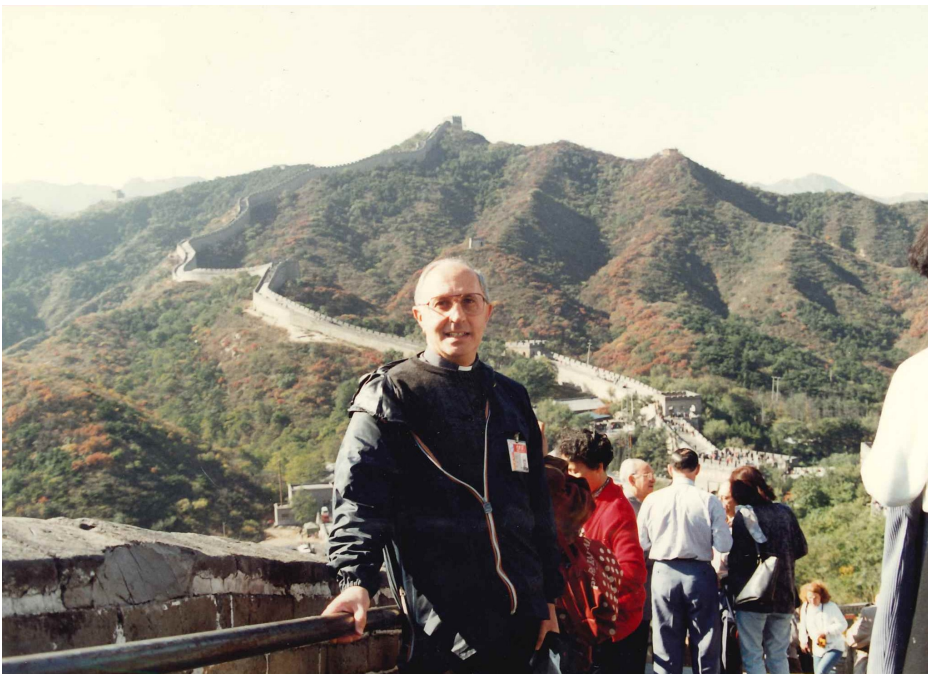
I remained in Brazil from 1989 to 1992. Brazil was a completely different world compared to my previous experiences. During this period, Brazil was a peaceful country, yet full of complex socio#political and religious issues. In truth, Brazil is more continent than a country, with an extraordinary wealth of cultures, traditions, ethnic groups, and ways of being and living. Religiously as well, it has countless forms of expression: from the predominantly Catholic tradition to others closer to a syncretism that embraces every sensibility. Within the Catholic Church, the situation was complex because of liberation theology, with very active figures who were often drifting toward socio#ideological extremes. This situation required significant engagement on our part, because work in Brazil meant studying these complex situations, maintaining contact with the dioceses, addressing their needs and, above all, overseeing the appointment of bishops. There were more than two hundred dioceses in Brazil, so we had to work hard to identify episcopal candidates and to understand the diverse diocesan contexts. It was, therefore, a tremendous ecclesiological training ground for me, and the Brazilian people were extraordinarily warm, and capable of sincere friendship. I carry with me many wonderful memories of those people.



Your diplomatic mission to Hong Kong was of great significance for the history of the Church in China during the pontificate of John Paul II. Did you also visit Beijing? What spiritual

experience touched you most deeply, which resonates with you most strongly, and how do you interpret it personally today?

This is how things unfolded. I was in Brasília, and the nuncio, Alfio Rapisarda, had left for Santo Domingo because John Paul II was meeting the Latin American episcopate. One day in October, the nuncio called me and said, “Look, the superiors here have told me that you are being transferred to China”. The news hit me out of the blue; it was completely unexpected. My reaction was, “Well, let’s go and see what this is about,” because I did not know the Far East well, and only began to discover it when I arrived in Hong Kong at the end of 1992. A few years earlier, the Holy See had established a Study Mission there. A nunciature could not be established as the territory was under British sovereignty and was due to be transferred to China in a few years; furthermore, there had been no diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See since Mao Zedong had founded the People’s Republic of China, and the nuncio was unwelcome. Since then, it had moved to Taiwan, the Republic of China; when I was in Hong Kong, the nunciature in Taipei was run by Chargés d’Affaires and dealt solely with that Island. I, instead, would be responsible for the two dioceses of Hong Kong and Macau, and had to follow the political evolution of mainland China, which was changing after Deng Xiaoping came to power, as well as the Church, which was emerging as if from the catacombs. After Mao Zedong’s death, Deng Xiaoping had begun a socio#economic opening, but no one knew how it would develop or what it would mean for religions –and for the Catholic Church in particular – given the Patriotic Association, which controlled every aspect of Church life. The fall of the Soviet Union and of communist regimes, as well as the role of the Church in the world under John Paul II, worried the Chinese leadership. In any case, after more than twenty years of Christian persecution, little was known about the actual situation. I went to Hong Kong and began studying it. John Paul II was very interested in many aspects, including: How many bishops were there? Who they were, and what was their canonical status? How many priests were there? What was their priestly formation? How did the parishes function? Had the dioceses survived?



At that time, there were bishops who, having been recognised by the Pope, had been granted the privilege of choosing their own successors (a privilege later revoked by Benedict XVI).

Instead, there were others who had been elected by the Patriotic Association (an offshoot of the Chinese Communist Party established to sever the Church in China from Rome), who were deemed

illegitimate. However some of the latter group had asked the Pope for forgiveness, whilst others had not. It was therefore necessary and vitally important to bring clarity to this complex situation and, in any case, seek not to antagonise the communist regime in Beijing. Nonetheless, while this was happening, it was necessary to give hope to the Church in China because the situation was extremely difficult. Thus began this extraordinary period of discovery and engagement. I worked patiently, gathering information bit by bit and doing whatever I could to help. My diplomatic passport was not accepted in the People's Republic of China, yet despite this, I did travel to Beijing and a few other places there for international meetings to which the Chinese government did not object. Hong Kong was an extraordinary observatory and a gateway for all those who travelled to China, which allowed me to receive first-hand information. It was a wonderful experience, and a true training ground, because I came to know about the real martyrdom of a Church. I used to say to John Paul II, and later to Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, "Never forget that in China people do not suffer today for Christ, but for their fidelity to the Pope."

I remember that when I showed John Paul II the first yearbook of the Chinese dioceses that I had compiled, he became deeply moved. For the first time, he was looking at photographs of the Chinese bishops and asking for information about them. He postponed all the other audiences he had scheduled.

We had to help both sides, foster dialogue and encourage communion among them. I spent more than eight years working within this dynamic, during which time I met many bishops, many situations, yet always with the utmost prudence. Naturally, even in China I had the opportunity to see and come to know some small communities in Shanghai, Beijing, and Hangzhou; others I knew through the accounts of those who had travelled to China. Much good was being done thanks to the Church, especially on the human and social level, for example with lepers, children, the poor, and so on, yet for reasons of prudence, no one said anything.



Apostolic Nunciature in Baghdad, Iraq

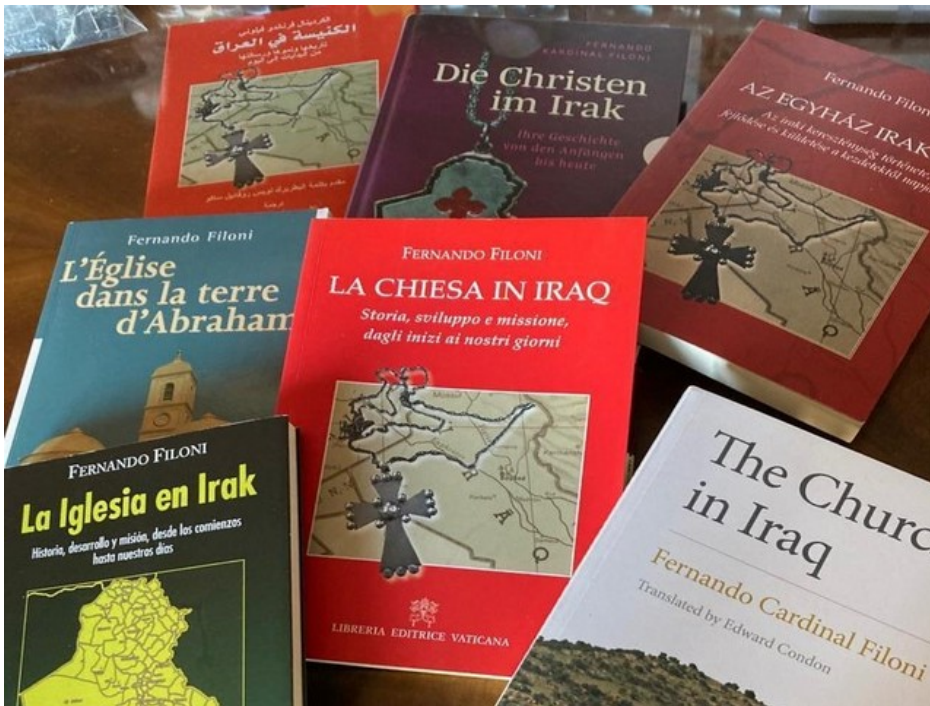
Later, in Iraq, during the so-called war waged by the United States and its allies, you were the only diplomat who did not leave the country.

After eight years in China, I found myself assigned to Iraq (2001-2006), and there too the situation was complex. The president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, was known internationally as a dictator, which he was, but no more and no less than many others in the region. Obviously, the fundamental issue

in the Middle East was, and still is, Israel's security, and, at the same time, the 'Palestinian question', as we see today with the war involving Iran. During the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, the United States had used Iraq against Iran; then, when Saddam Hussein occupied Kuwait, the United States turned against him. It seems they had initially given their consent and later withdrew it, which left Saddam Hussein exposed. He claimed the Kuwaiti territory, stating, "Doesn't the oil beneath Kuwait also come from Iraq? In addition, aren't the wells close to our border? And did borders even exist during the Ottoman Empire?" However, he was unaware of international law, since under the agreements of 1915–18 (when the major colonial powers divided up the Middle East through the Sykes–Picot treaties) Kuwait had become a sovereign state.



Therefore, he had violated international law. With the oil at his disposal, Saddam Hussein bought weapons, and made Iraq a regional military power, which was something Israel and other neighbouring countries did not welcome. Following the occupation (1990) and the expulsion from Kuwait (1991), the United Nations imposed severe economic sanctions on Iraq. I therefore found a nation trying to emerge from those sanctions, but there was no agreement on the international demands. I had to follow the two countries of Jordan, which is essentially a peaceful nation, and Iraq, with its serious internal problems, because the Kurds in the north were fighting Saddam Hussein, and in the south, the Shiites were rebelling too. As I could not fly due to the embargo, I had to drive 900 kilometers across the desert between Baghdad and Amman. The desert has its own charm, but you really hope nothing goes wrong, as there were no service stations or mobile phone coverage. We, as the Catholic Church (Chaldean, Syriac, Latin, Melkite), together with the other Christian Churches, were a small presence, but there was freedom of worship and people lived together without major difficulties. The people were kind and respectful; for example, I treasure a simple pectoral cross made by an Iraqi Muslim, who crafted it as a token of appreciation for my decision not to leave Iraq during the Second Gulf War. Saddam Hussein held the Holy See in high regard because the nuncios remained in Baghdad throughout both the First and Second Gulf Wars. Furthermore, he respected Christians.



Your Eminence, you wrote a book, titled The Church in Iraq: From the Beginnings of Apostolic Preaching to the Present Day, published by the Vatican Publishing House and available in many languages. You often speak of a little girl called Nur, who embodies the very essence of the Church’s mission in that country. What can you tell us about this?

Yes, I wrote the book because I admired how Christians had managed, for centuries, to survive intimidation, violence, and persecutions that at times erupted at the tribal, political, or religious level. We must not forget that a century ago, during the **1915–1920 period**, in the northern part of Iraq (especially in Armenia/Cilicia region) there was a widespread genocide of Christians, when **1.3 million Armenians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs were killed**. There are those who say this was not a genocide, to whom I ask, if this was not a genocide, then I do not know how else it should be defined! In the ancient liturgical tradition of these Middle Eastern Churches, people still pray today in the **language of Jesus**. They have preserved an incredible richness for all of us. These are ancient Churches, like the Latin Church. They are sister Churches, which may be smaller in number, but extraordinarily significant because of their history.

Among the people I met, Nur holds a special place in my heart. At the time, she was a severely disabled newborn baby, who had been welcomed by the Sisters of Mother Teresa, who had been authorized by Saddam Hussein to open a small home. This was a kind of hospital for boys and girls whose families had rejected them because of their serious mental or physical disabilities. We usually speak only ill of Saddam Hussein, but in this decision to allow the Sisters of Mother Teresa to care for children with grave, incurable conditions, I believe he showed an extraordinary, positive, and respectful vision of life. In this regard, I can only speak well of him for those children and the Sisters were under his personal protection.

From time to time, I would visit them, and celebrate Mass for the Sisters too. One day they told me, “They have brought us a newborn; we have named her Nur,” which means *Light*. She was a child without arms or legs; yet mentally she seemed normal. The Sisters raised her. The beautiful thing is that when Pope Francis made his pastoral visit to Iraq, he wanted me to accompany him, and I went. After the visit to the head of state, the Pope went to greet the Christian community in the Syriac#Catholic cathedral, where dozens of people had been killed in suicide attacks. The Pope wanted to make a gesture of great love and respect toward that deeply wounded Christian community.

I saw the Sisters of Mother Teresa and upon greeting them, I asked, “What had happened to Nur?” They took me a short distance away; the young woman was sitting in a wheelchair, with the face of an entirely normal young person; indeed, I would say a lovely one. We looked at each other and I said, “Nur, you know that I have known you since the day you were born?” Nur then spoke English, and she gave me a beautiful smile, which was unforgettable. I thought to myself, this was one of Mother Teresa’s miracles. Nur is the good that came about far from the noise of the *mass-media*.

What images do you carry with you from the Philippines, which was your last diplomatic post before returning to Rome?

My time in the Philippines was a wonderful experience too. After the death of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI sent me to the Philippines, where I remained for just one year, before being recalled to serve as his close collaborator. This was in July 2007. I had come to know the Philippines since the time I had spent in Hong Kong, because I would go there from time to time and had been accredited as a cultural adviser. The Filipino people are extraordinarily wonderful, and who feel they have a mission in the East. They are very welcoming and rich in culture and faith. They tell me, and with a good dose of healthy humor, that about ten bishops appointed during my tenure as pontifical representative call themselves the “Filoni Club”. They have remained dear friends, and one of them has become a Cardinal.



You subsequently served as Deputy Secretary of State and then Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, working alongside Benedict XVI. What do you remember about him?

I got to know Benedict XVI whilst working closely with him as Deputy Secretary of State. It was an extraordinary period, and a true training ground for understanding the Church and its administrative mechanisms. Above all, this was because I was close to a Pope like Benedict#XVI, who was a man of great human depth, of incredible culture, and of extraordinary faith. He was a true man of God, whose teaching radiated throughout the entire Church. His three volumes on *Jesus of Nazareth* are extraordinarily beautiful; anyone who does not know them should read them. I must say that with him I truly learned what it means to “love the Church.”

In addition, I was struck by his humility and wisdom. When I brought to him matters that required his judgment, I expected him to tell me what to do. Instead, the first thing he would say was, “What do you think? What is your view?” He wanted to hear an opinion. He did not impose his own perspective; he sought it, listened, and then decided. In addition, depending on how you presented the issue, he would agree, or adjust, or change course, and conclude: “Let it be done this way.” This man’s immense wisdom, which is so often misunderstood, stemmed from the fact that he was not media-driven or “woke”; he loved justice and truth, to which we are each called upon to adhere.

After four years he said to me, “I have thought about it, and this is my decision, not anyone else’s: you will go to *Propaganda Fide* (the department responsible for missionary work around the world and overseeing some 1,200 dioceses), as Prefect.” He sensed that in that decision I would rediscover my old passion for missions. There followed another eight intense years. I must say that I loved *Propaganda Fide*, and still do, and above all the missions; one cannot imagine the immense sacrifices made by so many men and women, these missionaries, who gave their lives for the Gospel. During my eight years there, I made over fifty trips to mission countries. If the Church is present throughout the world today, it is because for four centuries *Propaganda Fide* has given an extraordinary impulse and support to the human and cultural development of peoples. For example, there are few who know that in 1750 Tuscan missionaries sent to Kurdistan found a spoken but unwritten language. They wrote it down, produced a grammar, and prepared the first dictionary of 5,000 words, which was subsequently published by *Propaganda Fide*.



Pope Francis appointed you Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre before the end of your mandate as Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Why? In addition, what have you discovered in this new role?

About my appointment as Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, I have wondered about it, but never enquired why it came about. I departed the *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples* with a certain sorrow, because I had left my heart there. Soon, however, I realized that before leaving that Dicastery at the age of seventy-five, the Pope had entrusted me with caring for a lay Order that is found throughout the world, which I perceived as a great parish in many nations. I had begun as an assistant parish priest in Rome in 1970, and I would end my life of “canonical” age as a cleric, as a parish priest, which is a role I had never held before. It is not good for a priest to have never served at least once in his life as a parish priest!

The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem was founded from what I believe to have been Pope Pius IX's prophetic intuition in 1847, at a time when Israel did not yet exist and the reality of the Latin Church there had not existed since the time of the Crusades. There was no Patriarch (the Bishop), and there was no diocesan structure. Instead, there was the Order of Friars Minor, whose task was to care for the places of Jesus, and to safeguard them and assist visiting pilgrims. Pope Pius IX, after reaching an agreement with the sultan of Constantinople, wanted the Latin Patriarch, after centuries of impediment, to rebuild the Church in the Holy Land, and he had the happy intuition of establishing a chivalric order committed to supporting it. Today more than ever, we see how important it is that the whole Church remain close to the land of Jesus. The Order has about thirty thousand members who generously assist the Patriarchate and its pastoral, educational, and social works.

Later, Pope Leo XIII wished that the Order should also include women, as Dames, with the same responsibilities as the men, the Knights. The Order's mission today, therefore, is to help the Mother Church of Jerusalem. For this reason, it is essential that our Knights and Dames possess a deep spirituality, love and contribute to the support of the Patriarchate, and to remember to help the Churches to which they themselves belong.

March 19 is the feast day of Saint Joseph. What place does this Saint hold in your life as a bishop and cardinal?

The date of my episcopal ordination was chosen by Pope John Paul II at the conclusion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000; however, the episcopal ordinations, which usually took place on January 6, were postponed to March 19, 2001. Personally, this a date that brings me happiness.

Why is that? I like to say that Saint Joseph was the "first bishop" of the Church because he was the one who safeguarded the Holy Family of Nazareth. Today he is the "Custos" of the Church. If Mary's mission was to give birth to Jesus, Joseph had the task of guarding, protecting, and accompanying the Holy Family. Joseph is the first righteous man of the Church. By analogy, the bishop is the "guardian" of the Church, according to Saint John the Apostle's wonderful expression,

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, we proclaim also to you" (1 Jn 1:1). Is this not a bishop's mission?

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