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O'Brien's opportunity with the Order of the Holy Sepulchre

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NCR Today

Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore is known for rarely pulling his punches, whether it's openly wondering if the Legionaries of Christ are capable of reform in the wake of the scandals surrounding their founder, or pushing Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley on gay marriage.

Here's hoping O'Brien brings the same "tell-it-like-it-is" style to his new job as pro-Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, because the embattled Christians of the Middle East desperately need a real political heavyweight to take up their cause.

The Vatican announced today that O'Brien, 72, will replace Cardinal John Foley as the head of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, a Vatican-sponsored body designed to defend and promote the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Traditionally, the position has been little more than a sinecure — a quasi-honorary position given to ecclesiastics at the end of their careers, providing them with a route to becoming a cardinal without much real responsibility.

One could also interpret the move in those terms for O'Brien, the dictionary definition of a loyal churchman whose 2007 appointment to Baltimore meant that he wouldn't get the ultimate prize of becoming the Archbishop of New York. (O'Brien was born in New York in 1939 and was a priest of the archdiocese.) In effect, giving him the Order of the Holy Sepulchre could be styled as a sort of consolation prize, putting him in line to join the College of Cardinals sometime in the next couple of years.

Yet the position is too important to treat as a party favor, because in effect — that is, in terms of its potential, not how it's actually been used — the Grand Master amounts to a cabinet-level Vatican position exclusively devoted to the fate of Christianity in the land of its birth. Occupied by someone with drive and political savvy — i.e., someone like Edwin O'Brien at his best — it could become the "tip of the spear" for a far more concentrated and effective global Catholic response to the realities facing Christians in today's Middle East.

The situation is, of course, dire in the Holy Land itself (Israel and the Palestinian Territories), where the Christian footprint has been shrinking for more than a century, and where the exodus has been compounded both by the pathology of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and by the rise of Islamic radicalism. I recently reported on a conference in London where the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, warned that the Holy Land risks becoming a "spiritual Disneyland" — full of glittering rides and attractions, but empty of its indigenous Christian population.

Yet Christianity is also at risk in many other parts of today's Middle East.

Over the weekend, the *New York Times* magazine published a compelling piece by Negar Azimi sketching the accelerating tendency among Coptic Christians in Egypt to flee. There are an estimated 10 million Copts, one of the largest and oldest Christian communities in the region, and today a growing number are on the verge of pulling up roots — afraid that the democratic promise of the Arab Spring will give way to an Islamic theocracy dominated by Salafists, who openly describe Christian churches as "mafias harboring weapons and sinners."

In some ways, Egypt could turn into a replay of Iraq, which was itself home to a large Christian community estimated at roughly two million prior to the First Gulf War in 1991. Today the best guess is that perhaps 400,000 Christians remain, meaning that Iraq has lost roughly two-thirds of its Christian population in the arc of just two decades.

All this ought to be of massive concern to Christians in the West, perhaps especially in the United States. Here's why:

- The Middle East is where Christianity began, and thus it's critical to an authentic sense of Christian identity.
- The West plays an enormous role in the affairs of the Middle East, and thus Christians in the West have a special responsibility to come to the aid of their struggling brothers and sisters in that part of the world.
- The most passionate vision of religious freedom anywhere in the Christian world today comes from the Middle East, where democracy, tolerance, and a healthy distinction between religion and the state represent a survival strategy. Boosting the Christian presence in the region amplifies that voice in the global church.
- Christianity is one key to peace in the region, and therefore peace in the world. The presence of Christianity suggests that pluralism is possible in the Middle East — and, conversely, the disappearance of Christianity would send precisely the wrong signal.

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As compelling as those arguments may be, somebody with real political heft needs to make them, in a fashion that will cause the Catholic world to sit up and take notice. Somebody needs to cajole, shame,

badger and bully Catholic institutions, as well as the rank and file, into getting involved.

Prior to today, it wasn't exactly clear who that 'somebody' might be, even in theoretical terms. The Vatican has put O'Brien in a position to become that somebody, and if he seizes the opportunity, he could go down as the most consequential Grand Master in hundreds of years.

This is almost certainly O'Brien's last job in the church. Let's pray he makes it count.

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