

PROFILE

SEBASTIAN FRANCIS

Sebastian

Francis was born in Johor Bahru on **November 11, 1951**. He studied at St Joseph's Primary School run by the Brothers of St Gabriel, for six years. He then continued his studies at the Montfort Secondary School, also run by the Brothers of St Gabriel, Singapore for four years.

He joined the Juniorate of the Brothers of St Gabriel in Singapore and resided with the Brothers in the community from **1964 to 1966**. Then he joined St Francis Xavier's Minor Seminary in Singapore from **1967 to 1970**.

He passed his Senior Cambridge examinations in **1967** and his Higher School Certificate in **1970**, at St Francis Xavier's Minor Seminary in Singapore.

In 1971, Sebastian enrolled in College General Major seminary in Penang and completed the two-year course in Initiation and Philosophy in **1972**.

As a Seminarian on leave in **1973**, he worked as a temporary teacher at St Theresa's Secondary School, Sungei Petani, Kedah and assisted in the Church of Christ the King, also in Sungei Petani.

He returned to College General Major Seminary, Penang in **1974**, and completed Theology in 1976. In these three years, as a Seminarian, Sebastian continued his weekend pastoral work at the Church of Christ the King.

He was **ordained a deacon in January 1977** at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Johor Bahru. On **July 28**, Fr Sebastian Francis was **ordained a priest of the Melaka-Johor diocese** again at the Church of the Immaculate Conception by Bishop James Chan.

Thereafter, he was posted to the Church of the Immaculate Conception from **July 29 until Sept 23, 1977**.

Following this, Fr Sebastian was appointed as assistant priest to the Church of St Francis Xavier, Melaka from **September 1977 to January 1981**. He went back to Immaculate Conception Church in Johor Bahru as assistant parish priest from **January 15 to October 1981**.

In **January 1981**, he was appointed consultor, a post he held until **1984**.

From **October 1981**, Fr Sebastian studied at the Angelicum University of St Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy for a Licentiate in Dogmatic Theology, and graduated in **June 1983**. During his Easter break, he served the Church of St Thomas Canterbury, London and at the Church of St Francis Xavier, New York.

He returned to Malaysia in **February 1984** and was posted to the Church of St Francis Xavier, Melaka until **June 1984**. Thereafter, he left for Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur and Indonesia for an in-depth study of Bahasa Malaysia until **December 1984**.

From **1985 to 1990**, Fr Sebastian taught Dogmatic Theology at College General, Penang. While there he also served as a Formator and Spiritual Director.

He was also chaplain for the Tamil Charismatic Renewal for the Diocese of Penang from **1986 to 1990**.

From **December 1987 to February 1988**, he took a short break to serve at the Church of the Sacred Heart, Queensland, Australia. While on his sabbatical from **July 1990 to June 1991**, Fr Sebastian studied at the Maryknoll School of Theology in New York and obtained an advanced Degree in Justice and Peace. At the same time, he served at the Church of St Columbanus, also in New York. Msgr Francis served a second term at College General, Penang from **July 1991 to June 1998** as lecturer, Formator and Spiritual Director. At the same time, he assisted in St Anne's Church, Bukit Mertajam, St Michael's Church, Alor Setar and St Francis De Sales Church, Setiawan, Perak.

Between **July and September 1992**, he took up a programme on Personal Growth, development and Spirituality for Formators in Ashirvad, a Jesuit Institution in Bangalore, India.

On his return in **February 1999**, he was appointed, first as assistant priest of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Johor Bahru and later as the administrator.

In **March 1999**, he was appointed director of the Pastoral Institute of the Melaka-Johor Diocese until **March 2008**.

From **1999** until the present, he was appointed a member of the Peninsular Malaysia Pastoral Team (PMPT) and chairman of its meetings.

In the absence of a diocesan bishop and upon the retirement of Bishop James Chan Soon Cheong, Fr Sebastian was appointed the diocesan administrator from **December 11, 2001 to May 15, 2003**.

On **May 23, 2003** he was appointed Vicar-General of the Melaka-Johor Diocese by Bishop Paul Tan SJ, a position which carries the title monsignor.

From **2006** until the present, Msgr Sebastian was instrumental in organizing the Peninsular Malaysia Pastoral Convention (PMPC) III for the Peninsular Malaysia arch/dioceses.

He was appointed parish priest of Church of St Louis, Kluang and the administrator of St Philip's Church, Segamat, St Peter's Church, Mersing, St Henry's Church, Batu Pahat and St Anthony's Church, Cha'ah, between **April 15, 2011 and January 7, 2011**.

He also held the position of chairman of the Diocesan Finance Committee of the Melaka-Johor diocese.

From **2009** until **2012**, Msgr Sebastian was made Director of Formation for the seven candidates for the permanent diaconate. These candidates were ordained on **August 1, 2011**.

On **January 8, 2011**, Msgr Sebastian was appointed parish priest of Church of Christ the King,

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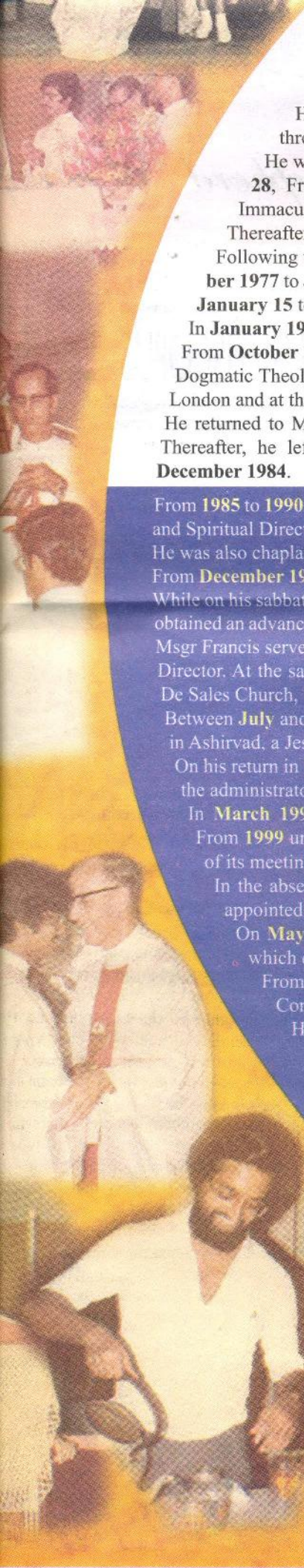
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Pope Benedict XVI appointed Msgr Sebastian Francis, 61, as the new bishop of Penang. He succeeds Bishop Antony Selvanayagam, 76, whose resignation the Holy Father has accepted on **July 7, 2012**.



"A SHEPHERD I PRAY I'LL BE"

With *Fiat Voluntas Tua* which translates as *Thy Will be Done* as his motto, Bishop-elect of Penang, Sebastian Francis, locates himself in the mainstream of the magisterium's teaching on faith and morals in this exclusive interview.

Q. What persuaded you to take the path towards the priesthood, particularly the diocesan priesthood?

A: Literally, growing up with the priests of the parish of the Immaculate Conception in Johor Bahru, especially with Fr Bernard Binet and his big and fast motorbikes. He was part of the family. I enjoyed all the rides on his motorbike and all the picnics and fun. The formation in College General built upon this very happy foundation with committed formators and the direction in pastoral leadership by Fr Catel further grounded my vocation as a diocesan priest. On two occasions I was distracted and tempted to leave while in formation.

Q. How were your seminary days? Were they tough?

A: Seminary days in Singapore and Penang were full of adventure, discovery, and pleasant memories. Fr Pierre Barthoulot, MEP, was tough and called me a good protestant maybe because of my protesting nature. College General in Penang first under the French fathers and then the local formators was intellectually and pastorally exhilarating. The pastoral formation under Fr Lucien Catel, MEP, in Kedah has left a lasting impression together with the team work involving Frs James Gnanapiragasam and Marshall Fernandez.

Q. Why have you placed so much premium on pastoral work?

A: The premium on pastoral work is mentioned in the document of Pope John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, all formation – human, intellectual, spiritual and community life must have a pastoral finality. Feed, tend and lay down your life for the sheep.

Q. On the occasion of your sacerdotal silver jubilee on July 27, 2002 in Johor Bahru, you were quoted in HERALD as saying, "The next 25 years of my priestly life will be spent on providing service to the diocese." Could you elaborate on this?

A: Maybe because my priesthood has been so far neatly divided into three parts.

a. Ordained at age 25 on July 28, 1977, I spent the first 25 years mostly in studies and as formator in the Seminary in Penang.

b. Returned to the diocese of Melaka-Johor in 1997 and hoped to integrate myself in the diocese for the next 25 years. But this has been now cut short. Still I have spent 16 years in ministry in the diocese of my birth for which I thank Bishop Emeritus James Chan and Bishop Paul Tan.

c. God willing, I will retire and celebrate my Golden Jubilee at 75 years of age. But let me be content. One day at a time, Lord Jesus.

Q. Now that you have been made Bishop of Penang, how will you provide that service to the diocese you are heading?

A: The Catholic Church is a story and Living Tradition of Continuity and Transformation. So, I will continue the ministry of my four predecessor bishops and the vision and mission of the Peninsular Church.

Q. What would be some of your priorities as Bishop of Penang? Could you list three of your priorities in the order of importance?

A: Let us say I am happy to begin my ministry as the Bishop of Penang with the call of Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to begin the Year of Faith. My first priority will be to encourage clergy, religious and lay faithful to discover their identity and potential by making a personal decision to enter that "door of faith." To celebrate, deepen and share the faith, an undeserved

and precious gift with all. I believe this immediate priority is God-given and a grace-filled moment. The other priorities will flow from this response.

Q. Is there a shortage of priests in your diocese? If so, how do you propose to address this problem?

A: There will always be a shortage because Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few." Priests are also labourers in the vineyard of the Lord. Maybe we should focus on the plentiful harvest and pray for more labourers in the vineyard which include clergy, religious and lay vocations including missionary vocations.

Q. Will you stand up and fight against injustice, human rights violations, racial discriminations, etc., of which the government is often accused?

A: It is part of the prophetic ministry of the bishop and all baptized persons.

Q. Could you tell us about the Church's role and responsibility in present day society, domestically and universally?

A: In my oath of fidelity to the Holy Father, I was reminded of my responsibilities not only towards my own diocese but the universal Church as a successor to the apostles and in an ecclesial and spiritual bond with the Holy Father and other bishops.

Q. Will you introduce into your diocese the "permanent diaconate"?

A: In Acts 6:4, Peter says – Let us appoint deacons so that we the apostles can devote ourselves to prayer and the Ministry of the Word. I would desire to devote myself to prayer and Ministry of the Word.

Q. What would you like to be remembered for? Detachment.



COMMENTS



"I thank God for the blessing of a new bishop for Penang Diocese, in the person of a gifted priest, endowed with many talents, skills and aptitudes.

"I consider Msgr Sebastian as one of the best preachers in town – not only can he lucidly explain the gospel message and make it relevant to the day and congregation, but as he preaches and develops his thoughts he seems to carry the audience along with him.

In chairing a planning meeting or a brainstorming session, when all are embroiled in a quagmire of contrary ideas, opinions and approaches and suggestions, he can somehow spell out a focus and indicate clear directions that the group could follow.

"He is comfortable with all sorts of people and puts clients at ease in his pastoral ministry as he journeys with them in the quest for God's will.

In short, he is a good gift of God to the Diocese.

"I joyfully welcome him into our Bishops' Conference. I pray God to bless him with good health and a fruitful ministry." **Archbishop Murphy Pakiam**



"Everyone is full of hope and looking forward to a breath of fresh air with the new Bishop. After 29 years, most people are open to anything as it will be a change from the old guard. "In my opinion, he is a very intelligent man, with good administrative skills, fast-paced and far-sighted. He would give credit where and when it's due and his appointment will renew the aspirations of the faithful and clergy as well.

"He is also a very personal bishop, with great interpersonal skills and sentiments. He would never fail to visit the families of any deceased parishioners to offer his spiritual support and I have seen him caring especially for the elderly. For his ordination, he even insisted on the parents of priests to attend his ordination. He is no stranger to the diocese as he has worked almost a decade lecturing at the seminary and also worked four years as the administrator of the Immaculate Conception Church in Pulau Tikus."

Msgr Michael Cheah

"The Bishop-elect Sebastian Francis was my classmate during our college years in College General Penang. He is friendly, open-minded and I believe he has the necessary natural leadership qualities.

"I wish to congratulate the Bishop-elect for his courage to take that heavy responsibility as a Shepherd for Penang Diocese. I pray that God always be with him in his Episcopal ministry. I am confident that with the grace of God and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Bishop Sebastian will serve God's people with faithfulness, generosity and love."

Bishop Cornelius Piong



"I have waited for many years for a successor. I'm happy to note now there is one in the person of Msgr Sebastian Francis. I have personally known him for a long time. I am sure he will continue from where I had left.

"He is a capable person, and as such he should be able to lead the people of the Diocese of Penang to grow spiritually and to build the church into a communion of parishes. This year, being the Year of Faith (beginning Oct. 2012), it will be a good opportunity for him to guide the people into a deeper faith which will lead them to commitment to grow in faith and build up the church."

Bishop Emeritus Antony Selvanayagam



"A Bishop is chosen, appointed and sent by Christ to a diocese for a divine purpose. He will have to lay down in clear view what the priorities of the Diocese could be for the good of the Catholic community. The newly appointed Bishop elect Sebastian Francis is a man of leadership, intelligence, pastoral sensitivity and holiness. Great and wonderful things can happen for the greater glory of God and for the Diocese of Penang. We welcome him to the Diocese and may the Lord uphold him as our bishop, and may he bear much fruit...witnessing to God's love and mercy."

Fr Jude Miranda, Taiping Catholic Church

"I believe that our new Bishop can do a good job of guiding the Diocese towards a new way of being Church, in the context of BEC. He is friendly, approachable and will listen to the grassroots. Thus I hope the parishioners can work well with him too."

Fr Martin Then CDD, Church of the Holy Name of Jesus

"Congratulations! The Clergy and Laity need a good and holy Shepherd to lead the Church in Penang Diocese. We will pray for our Bishop. God Bless!"

Fr Dominic Santhiyagu, City Parish

"For the past few months, we have been in limbo as to who will take over from Bishop Selva. The news came... and it was not something unexpected. We have a person who believes in collaborative ministry; this makes the Diocese (clergy and laity) to be more participative and thus brings a challenge to all of us."

Fr Francis Anthony, Church of St Anthony, Nibong Tebal.

"I have known him from my seminary days and through the time he served in the Diocese of Penang. He has always been forward-looking and one who is always ahead of time. Therefore, I anticipate winds of change sweeping through the diocese and I would also say his appointment would bring progress for the diocese.



"The laity would also expect more from him especially now that the church is emphasising the role of the laity. The laity would also expect some guidance and direction from the church, during these trying times when there is a lot happening in the country's political scene. They will be looking to the church for response and this is relevant, in the current scenario. The church is expected to play a prophetic role in these circumstances and I believe he will be able to guide us well."

Msgr Bernard Paul



FROM THE LAITY

"I am looking forward to the new Bishop taking office. He was my parish priest at Immaculate Conception Church. I used to enjoy his homilies."

Leonard Selva, Assumption Church



He is friendly, approachable and these are important qualities to get to the grassroots. May God bless him with good health and strength to carry out his duties and may the Sheep under his flock work well with him.

- Edmund Lee, communion minister at Cathedral, Penang



"It's good we have a new Bishop. May the good Lord bless him and keep him in his care always. Let us all work for the Lord and build the Kingdom of God together. We love you, Bishop and our prayers are for you."

Sebastian Pillai, Diocesan Service Team (Charismatic)



"The process of change has a power of its own. The people I know are jumping with excitement...and look forward to renewed energy and intensity in the Diocese. So we pray... 'Fill our souls, Lord'."

Angie Kam, Immaculate Conception Church

How do we join hands in the search for justice and compassion and engage with the new social movements that have emerged? How is the church to respond to corruption in public life and the compromising of public institutions?

"The challenges are formidable and there is a desperate need for inspired leadership. I pray that the Holy Spirit will guide the local church under the stewardship of Bishop Sebastian Francis to be more inclusive and relevant to the needs of the local church and wish him all the best in his ministry."

Anil Netto



"Though Bishop Sebastian is faced with a very delicate job of providing a new and clear direction to a Diocese that has had the same bishop for the past 29 years, he is no stranger to the Penang Diocese and has that daring, determination and dedication that will be demanded of him.

"In a world marked by complexity, pluralism and fragmentation, I feel the major challenges which Bishop Sebastian will face with both the clergy and laity are dialogue, delegation and discipline and in convincing everyone they are an important part of a shared dream and vision!"

Martin Jalleh, Ipoh