

A Missionary in the Near East

Father Kolvenbach was first missioned by the Society to minister in Lebanon as a 30-year-old scholastic. It is clear that the experience of living in a war-torn, but welcoming land had an effect:

When in October 1958 we arrived by boat in the harbour of Beirut, Lebanon, fighting was going on. The 18 different religious groups were trying to dominate one another, making political and military alliances with the help of neighbouring countries. Still, Lebanon wanted to maintain a message that diverse people can live, work and practice their beliefs with one another. The welcome of the Lebanese was unforgettable. Even as the division in the country grew worse, never was the hope abandoned that Lebanon might become a sign of communal harmony for the whole Near East.

He was ordained to the priesthood in Beirut on the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, June 29, 1961. He earned his doctorate in sacred theology from the Jesuit-run St. Joseph University in Beirut and studied linguistics at the Sorbonne and the University of The Hague. Father Kolvenbach also served as both a professor of linguistics at St. Joseph University and as vice-provincial of the Jesuits' Near-East Vice-Province, which served the Society of Jesus in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

After nearly two years as the rector of the Oriental Institute in Rome, Father Kolvenbach was elected by the delegates of General Congregation 33 to succeed Father Pedro Arrupe as the order's leader.