

# Msgr. Foy shares his more than a century of Christmas wisdom



God-willing, this will be my 102nd Christmas on Earth (if you count the one when I was an unborn child) and my 77th Christmas as a priest.

I still recall giving the homily at Midnight Mass at St. Michael's Cathedral one Christmas in the 1960s. Back then, it was broadcast on the radio. When I went to Cardinal James McGuigan to get his blessing before I preached, he leaned over and whispered: "Be bright, be brief and be gone."

My father, a devout Catholic, listened through the radio and said I did very well. That meant a lot to me. His kind words remain a fond Christmas memory.

Another memorable Christmas occurred more recently. In 2009 I fell and

broke my hip. Complications ensued, which led to five operations and left me in hospital being fed through a tube. I was unable to offer Mass for six months, but requested and received daily Holy Communion by one drop of the Precious Blood on my tongue.

I was told I could not get accepted into long-term residence at Providence Healthcare unless I could eat and drink on my own. It was a very difficult time in my priesthood. Then, after six months, I was able to take my first drink of water on Christmas day.

I celebrated my 101st birthday at Providence in August and now, as I am perched on the precipice of eternity, I've been pondering some historical records in the temporal realm. I have discovered I hold the record as the longest ordained and the oldest diocesan priest in the history of the Archdiocese of Toronto, according to a booklet called A Calendar of the Deceased Bishops, Priests and Deacons of the Archdiocese of Toronto. Research done by contacting every diocese nationwide found only one other diocesan priest in the history of Canada who was ordained longer, but he was French-speaking (Fr. Roger Duval of Quebec City, who is deceased). If I live until about Dec. 29, 2017, I will surpass his 78.5 years of ordination.

I'm the oldest living diocesan priest in Canada and have the most years of ordination for any Anglophone diocesan priest in the history of the Church in Canada. Worldwide, I found only four priests who have served longer, two of whom are still living and more than 100 years old. Fr. Jaques Clemens of Belgium is 107 and has been a priest for 80 years.

As the years passed, I became aware I was outliving my colleagues and former classmates. I certainly would not have imagined such longevity when I was ordained in 1939.

I wanted to be a priest from the time I was six or seven years old. My mother was very ill in the hospital. The doctor told my father she might die and he told us to be prepared. I appealed to God and promised that if my mother

lived I would do my best to become a priest. My mother recovered and I kept my promise.

A lot has changed over the years, but the role of a priest remains the same: to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and to provide the sacraments. A priest is to be "in the person of Christ," in Persona Christi.

One noticeable difference today is the way Christmas is celebrated. When I was ordained, Canada was a nation of Judeo-Christian morality and beliefs. Then came secularization, false ecumenism and many persons of other religions joining Canadian society.

But there are many ways to keep Christ in Christmas.

As a priest, we can put Christ back in Christmas through homilies, catechesis and encouraging traditions. These include: sharing the real story of St. Nicholas, especially for the children; promoting Advent and Christmas hymns and carols and concerts; setting up an Advent wreath, nativity figures, and keeping Christmas lights on.

Make this time of year spiritual. Enjoy the Advent liturgies, even go to daily Mass if possible. Go to Confession. Be prepared early and avoid the last-minute rush. Pray the family rosary. Where you can, say Merry Christmas. Forgive and forget.

I enjoy sending Christmas cards that recall the real meaning of Christmas, including a religious image and message, especially with Jesus and the manger.

Christmastide is a time to be grateful to God and to spread some cheer and reconnect and strengthen family and society.

*(Msgr. Foy is a canon lawyer who served the Archdiocese of Toronto in several capacities, including vice-chancellor, parish pastor and more than 25 years in marriage tribunals: msgrfoy.com.)*

