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Priest celebrates 75 years of ministry

by Jen Reed by Catholic News Service

HARRISBURG, Pa. -- On the day of his birth, July 28, 1912, Vincent Topper was expected to die. The newborn, suffering from tuberculosis, was baptized by a parish priest as his parents prepared to lose yet another child to the dreaded disease.

But God had plans for Vincent, namely that he serve the Catholic Church of Harrisburg as a priest, a ministry he has faithfully fulfilled for 75 years.

At age 98, Msgr. Topper is the diocese's oldest and longest-serving priest. He resides at St. Catherine Laboure Parish in Harrisburg, where he continues to celebrate Mass and administer the sacrament of reconciliation.

"People ask me what's my secret. My secret to a long life is to get baptized on the day you're born because you're supposed to die, and you'll live to be 100," said the priest quipped in an interview with *The Catholic Witness*, Harrisburg's diocesan newspaper.

Msgr. Topper's early childhood was filled with the reality of death. His mother and three siblings died, and his father nearly succumbed to the influenza epidemic of 1918. Those harsh realities led young Vincent to consider the priesthood by the time he was in second grade.

"I asked myself, 'What do I want to be when I grow up?' Well, I wanted to get to heaven, so I thought the best way to do that was to be a priest," he said.

In his hometown of Hanover, his life revolved around St. Joseph Parish. He lived one block from the church, where he served as an altar boy for 5:30 a.m. Mass.

"To me, priests and sisters were saints," he said. "Here I am a little boy without my mother. I would go to

school and put my arms around the legs of the sisters. I loved them and the priests because of their example."

He was confirmed by Bishop Philip McDevitt, who accepted him into the diocese's seminarian program. He entered St. Vincent College in Latrobe, where he spent two years in college in preparation for the seminary.

"We had little light to study by, practically no heat, and my roommate snored all night," he said. "You had to have a vocation to go through that as a young man!"

Bishop George Leech ordained then-Father Topper to the priesthood at St. Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg June 6, 1936.

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"As a priest, I never felt like anything but a father to people," said Msgr. Topper.

Over the years he served in many parishes; his first two assignments were as assistant pastor and followed by several assignments as pastor.

In each parish in which he served as pastor, he worked to expand Catholic education, whether it involved buying a bus to take children to school, building a school or expanding classrooms.

"My dedication was to the education of the children, because they are the future of the church," he said.

"You have to keep building the faith for the youth," Msgr. Topper added. "They need a foundation. If you don't provide our youth with a solid Catholic education, they're not going to practice their faith."

One assignment as pastor included tending to the spiritual needs of patients in a local tuberculosis sanatorium.

The hospital-like facility was a place where people either stayed to be cured, or went to die.

"Every week I would go see these people. I would hear their confession, bring them Communion and celebrate Mass for those who could attend," he said. "These people were away from their homes, living there for months and just hoping to be cured."

It was a heart-wrenching ministry for Msgr. Topper, and one that brought him full circle from his childhood experience with tuberculosis to his sacramental ministry as a priest.

In his 75 years as a priest, Msgr. Topper said he hopes he has influenced people by his "example and through the sacraments. I tried to be a good priest and bring the people to Christ and Christ to the people."

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