

Father William Jennings celebrates his first century

By Mike Lang
Staff reporter

NEWARK — The Diocese of Wilmington marked a first on June 6, when a priest of the diocese celebrated his 100th birthday. A party was in order.

The guest of honor was Father William Jennings, the oldest and, at 73 years ordained, the longest-serving priest of the diocese. Guests included residents, employees and volunteers from the Jeanne Jugan Residence, where Father Jennings has lived for several years, as well as family and friends from throughout his priestly ministry.

The day began with Mass celebrated with 10 of his fellow priests, and a party followed. One of the entertainers was Sean Reilly, a Wilmington resident known for his Frank Sinatra impersonations. Reilly sang a version of "That's Life" with lyrics written especially for the birthday.

"One hundred years, Father Bill, that's what you are," Reilly crooned. "You're a Christian light, both near and far."

The song ended with Father



Courtesy of the Jeanne Jugan Residence

Father William Jennings admires the cake at his 100th birthday party with (from left) Sister Elise, Mother Joseph Caroline and Sister Cecile at the Jeanne Jugan Residence, where the priest lives.

Jennings' "number one command: 'No one can do for you what Jesus Christ can.'"

Reilly's father, 87-year-old Fran Reilly, also attended the party. Fran Reilly played baseball for the St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception team in the early 1940s when Father Jennings, then in his late 20s, was the coach. A picture of the team was displayed on a dessert

table.

"He's 100 percent priest," said Reilly, who has known the priest for more than 70 years and visits him often at Jeanne Jugan. He noted that Father Jennings has outlived all but three members of that team.

Father Jennings took everything in with a smile. "It makes me think whether I deserve it all. Everybody has always been good

to me."

When asked his secret to a long life, he answered with one word: "God."

Established two parishes

Father Jennings was born on Reed Street in Wilmington on June 6, 1913, and attended St. Thomas the Apostle and Salesianum schools. He was ordained to the priesthood on May 6, 1940, in Baltimore, by Archbishop Michael J. Curley. He served at several Wilmington parishes and in many diocesan posts.

As pastor of St. Paul's Parish in Wilmington, he built the new parish school building. He was the founding pastor of two parishes in Brandywine Hundred, Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1956 and Holy Child in 1969.

One of his parishioners from Holy Child was at the party June 6 and recounted how the parish got its name. Dee Becker, a longtime pro-life activist, said she had been in Dover when she received bad news about abortion in Delaware and, distraught, called Father Jennings upon her return to Wilmington.

Father Jennings had met with Bishop Thomas Mardaga and said he wanted to name the new parish on Naamans Road in honor of Mary, but the bishop said there were enough parishes with Mary-related names. They settled on another name and the priest gave Becker a call.

"He said, 'I thought of a name after talking with you. We'll call it Church of the Holy Child,'" Becker recalled.

At other times during his priesthood, Father Jennings served as a theology teacher at Padua Academy, vocations director, moderator of the Young Catholics Study and Discussion Club, moderator of the Delaware chapter of Catholics United and chaplain to the Boy Scouts.

Sean Reilly captured the mood of the crowd during his version of "That's Life" when he sang, "We say happy birthday, and we wish you 100 more."

Father Roberto Balducelli, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, celebrates his 100th birthday in August. He was ordained in 1936 and came to Wilmington in 1946.



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