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In Remembrance: Fr Tom McKillop: Order of Canada, 'father' of families, friend of Jesus

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Fr Tom McKillop

Order of Canada,
'father' of families,
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I got the call at 11:30 pm the night that Tommy died. His great friend, Fr Terry Gallagher SFM, left a long, reflective message about Big T's passing.

My mind wandered back over the fifty years of our friendship. I smiled, then chuckled about taking him down to Rogers Field last summer to see the Yankees play. Tommy simply had to watch future Hall of Famer, Derek Jeter. "Tommy, there'll be a full house. Can't we see the Twins or some other team?" No way.

How do you say no to Big T even with a walker, slowly shuffling through the crowds? For Tommy, just like his master Jesus, "his yoke was easy, his burden was light." He was such a pleasure to be with even as he was breaking down physically. We laughed and joked the whole night and when I returned him to Providence Health Centre at 11:30 p.m. I warned him that tongues would be wagging.

Tom's death at 84 sent me back to our first meeting in the summer of 1960. I came down to the old ramshackled Columbus Boys' Club in Toronto's Little Italy. I was there to ask for advice from my baseball coach Carmen Bush, already an inner city legend. As I walked in I noticed the simple framed motto of the club, "The Other Guy." Underneath was a picture of a man with a note of thanks to Carmen. I asked him who he was. He told me his name was Tom McKillop and that he was the living embodiment of the club's motto.

Later we drove up to a west end park where McKillop was working as a playground supervisor during his summer vacation from the seminary. This was my introduction to the man known simply as "Tommy" or "Big T."

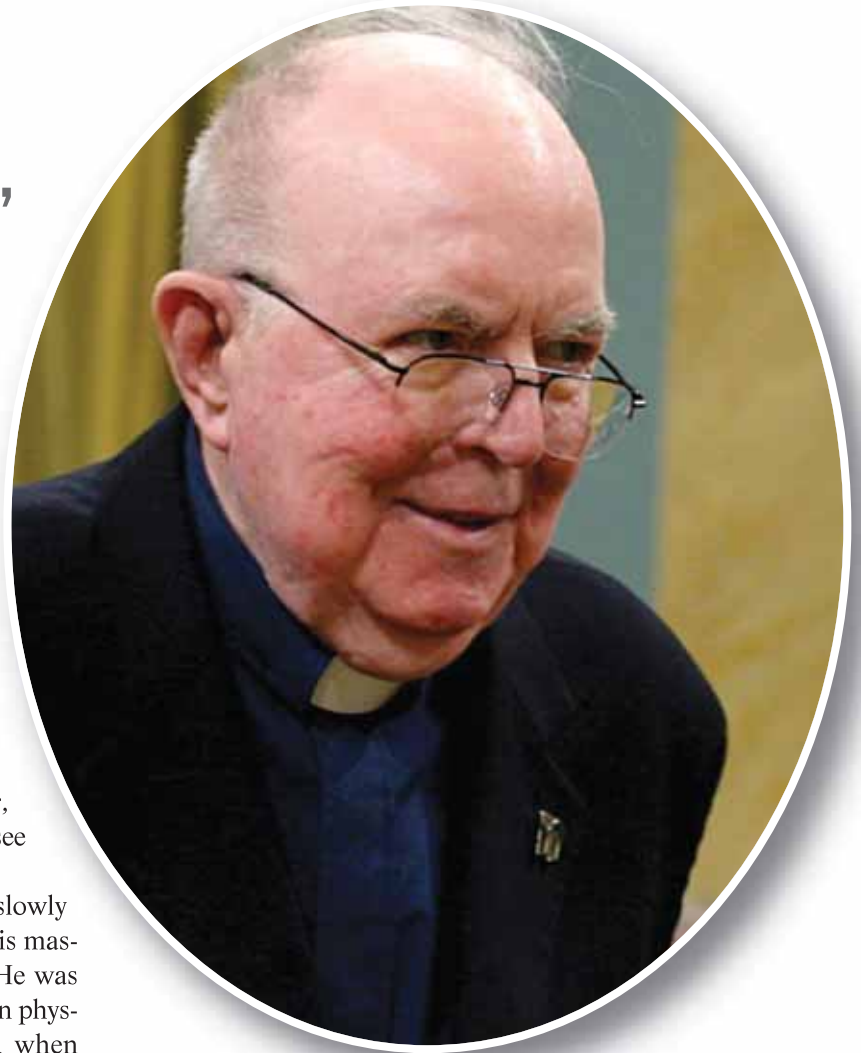


Photo courtesy of CCN

Forty five years later I found myself among the hundreds who flocked into Holy Name Catholic Church in Toronto's east end to hug and say thanks to a man who had such a profound impact on the youth of Toronto and who had just been invested with the Order of Canada.

A passion for sports

Tom McKillop was born in 1928 of working class parents in Toronto's west end. Like all Depression Era kids he channeled much of his youthful energy into sports, and in particular baseball. He was so nuts about the summer pastime that to the chagrin of his parents, he took off before his final exams at university to try his hand at professional baseball. He lasted but three weeks with a Philadelphia Phillies farm team.

Back to Toronto, his 'pro' dreams dashed, he wrote his university exams and embarked on a teaching career that included a heavy dose of athletics. Slowly the idea of priesthood emerged and impressed by the Paulist Fathers of St. Peter's Parish, Tommy entered their novitiate in New Jersey, then went to Washington for more study. Considered a little too intense and with a small speech impediment, he was cut again. Not easily dissuaded, McKillop entered Toronto's St. Augustine's seminary and was ordained at the mature age of 36 in 1964.

Assigned to St. Mark's parish and veteran pastor Gerry Cochrane, the energetic McKillop immersed himself in parish work which naturally included youth ministry. Then he was drafted by Archbishop Philip Pocock to head up the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). "Big T" was ready, mature through his life experience and fired by the vision of Vatican II to take youth ministry in another direction. His long experience in sports convinced McKillop that young people were hardwired for a much deeper immersion in life. He had grown past the rink and the diamond.

Youth Corps was born in 1966 based on the communal vision of Jesus in Luke 9 and 10. "Then Jesus called the twelve

together ... and he sent them out to proclaim the reign of God ... After this the Lord appointed seventy others ..."

The original Youth Corps team, three men and three women, moved into the community to serve, at first in hostels and poor parishes, then in prison visitations, poverty issues, Latin American solidarity and peace work. McKillop, radically centred in Jesus, listened deeply to the inchoate passions of his younger cohorts. Together, they teamed to discern the evolving signs of the times.

The late Bishop Tom Fulton, a former auxiliary in Toronto was a great supporter of Youth Corps, wrote "Big T" after World Youth Day: "Your founding of Youth Corps was rooted in the vision of Vatican II. It was Christocentric and designed for community building. It remains valid to this day. It is the answer to the question, 'Where do we go from here?'"

McKillop left Youth Corps in 1984 to take up pastorates in East Toronto and Newmarket, retiring in 1997. Tom suffered a stroke, yet carried on in his gentle way with his great ministry of listening and counseling. In 2006 he was awarded the Order of Canada and finally on February 9, 2012 the Order of Jesus. ■



Photo courtesy of The Catholic Register

Big T's impact

Joe Mihevc (Youth Corps 1979-83), now a dynamic Toronto city counselor, said, "Tom could flow with the agenda and take everything in stride. He recognized the passionate energy of all of us and was always open to supporting good ideas other than his own. Tom inspired a kind of Canadian liberation theology among the host of young people touched by Youth Corps. And then there were those 85 weekends over 20 years, when Christian families were strengthened in Sharon, Ontario — absolutely amazing."

Ellie Kaas who later worked with Tom as an associate at Holy Name parish said, "Tom is a visionary. He sees young people with their energy and passion creating small communities of justice and compassion in the church."

Sil Silvaterra (Youth Corps 1977-79), now a Peterborough lawyer said, "Big T was bent on shaping young people in Cardinal Cardijn's model of see, judge and act. He used the yearly 'Events' to energize and train young Catholics. He organized evenings with Dorothy Day, Viktor Frankl, Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, Mother Theresa, John Howard Griffin and many others. Years later, I came across management consultants who charged outrageous fees for the very organizing methods Tommy taught gratis with grace. In many ways he was a prophet, helping to found Christian family weekends and even *Catholic New Times* newspaper. And like most prophets, he was barely acknowledged by the local hierarchy."

Bob Carty (Youth Corps 1969-72), the award-winning documentary maker on CBC's *Sunday Edition*, reflected: "Youth Corps' goal was never meant to change a generation, but to work with smaller groups in depth. The benefits inevitably showed up in 10 or 20 years, where those people were in society."

Rosanna Pellizzari (Youth Corps, 1978-80) now the Medical Officer of Health for the Peterborough County-City Health Unit, said, "Tom simply walked the walk when it came to witness, activism, spirituality and leadership. He taught me everything I know about teamwork and steadfastness."

Professor Michael Warren (St. John's, NYC): "I have examined Youth ministry in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Canada. I know of no youth efforts as theoretically sound as Youth Corps. It exemplifies the thought of Vatican II."

Dwyer Sullivan (succeeded Fr Tom McKillop as Director of Youth Corps): "Youth Corps' inspiration came directly from modeling itself on Jesus' own way of forming leaders, not as individuals, but as members of a team, in pairs and small groups."