

'Man of the Year'

Msgr. Bonner's Father Atkinson Receives Award

By BOB ZYSKOWSKI

Father William Atkinson, a Philadelphia-area man who was the first quadriplegic to be ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood, this week will become the first Catholic priest to receive an award as one of "America's Ten Outstanding Young Men for 1977" from the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce.

Father Bill, as he's called by his Msgr. Bonner High

School students, will fly to Las Vegas this week with his family to receive the prestigious award, which in the past has been given to Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, Dr. Henry Kissinger and others.

The 31-year-old priest who was paralyzed from the neck down in a tobogganing accident during his seminary days, is confined to a wheelchair, but teaches classes in both first and second year

theology at Msgr. Bonner, in suburban Drexel Hill.

He was nominated for the national award by the Mainline Jaycees, who made him their local "Man of the Year" in 1975. Last year Father Atkinson was one of three persons named Man of the Year on the state level in Pennsylvania.

"Father Bill is just an incredible individual who leaves quite an impression on you," said John Heusler, chairman of the Mainline Jaycees' committee which put his name in nomination.

"I was very moved by him personally," Heusler said. "He's had a profound effect on my own life after meeting him. Whenever you're facing something difficult, you've got to think back on Father Bill and all that he's accomplished despite his handicaps."

In addition to teaching, Father Atkinson spends several hours every week at St. Edmond's Home for Crippled Children in Rosemont, where he said the

children like him because they see no hardships in him. "The kids like my wheels," he commented.

He also spent time at the Valley Forge Army Hospital, counselling service-

men who had been crippled during the Vietnam War.

"I'm honored by the award from the Jaycees," Father Atkinson said. "I hope some good comes of it."

"By that I mean the award will have true meaning only if it serves as a beacon that may show someone else with physical handicaps the way to self-sufficiency."

There was an extreme doubt that Father Bill would be allowed to be ordained, but in July, 1973, a telegram from Pope Paul arrived. "Atkinson Dispensation Granted" was all it said, but the dispensation meant that John Cardinal Krol was able to ordain him an-Augustinian priest in Feb. 1974.

At the time he was questioned if the death of his mother in the previous year dampened the ordinations celebrations. He replied, "No, you might say she had the best seat in the house."

Since then Msgr. Bonner has named an award "to the student who shows extraordinary courage and dedication" after Father Bill, and he has also been named to his alma mater's Hall of Fame, along with his brother Al, former line-backer with the New York Jets, and John Cappeletti, the Heisman trophy winner who is starring for the Los Angeles Rams.

"Our reason for nominating Father Bill comes right out of the Jaycee creed," Heusler said. "We believe that faith in God gives meaning and purpose to life, and that service to humanity is the best purpose in life. Father Bill simply cares for other men above all things."

Presentation of the award at the Las Vegas Performing Arts Club will be by President Gerald Ford, one of his last official functions as president.



(Photo by Robert S. Halvey)

FATHER BILL ATKINSON, O.S.A. 'MAN OF THE YEAR'