

Jaycee Nominee

Paralyzed Priest Fought All Odds

By HAROLD HYMAN
SUN Staff Writer

When the national Jaycees present awards to their choices as America's 10 outstanding young men of 1977 Saturday night in the Aladdin Theatre, one of those 10 will be in a wheelchair and unable to shake hands.

Despite being paralyzed from the neck down, however, Father Bill Atkinson, a 31-year-old Catholic priest from suburban Philadelphia, is perhaps the Jaycees most outstanding of the 10.

He is also the first quadriplegic in the history of the Catholic Church to be ordained as a priest.

A toboggan accident while he was a seminarian studying for the priesthood in 1965 left him with a broken neck. Only his brain remained intact afterward. Everything else in his body ceased to function.

Nevertheless, he managed to rehabilitate himself to a point where he could sit and maneuver in a motorized wheelchair during 16 months of agonizing convalescence.

This despite several major operations, one which consisted of transplanting a piece of his hipbone into his neck to hold his head up.

An avid athlete before his accident, Father Atkinson is

the younger brother of Al Atkinson, former linebacker for the New York Jets.

The determination and will to win he learned as an athlete, coupled with the encouragement and devotion of family and friends during the critical period following the accident, is what he credits with bringing him through his crisis.

That and a touch of God.

"We are not given a cross that is too heavy for us," Fr.

to be shared with others he recalled Thursday.

"I'm a product of my Christian background and it gave me the will not only to survive, but to go forward and attempt to become a priest.

His determination, his outstanding scholastic achievements in the seminary while studying and his total dedication to others since becoming a priest are among the reasons he was chosen as one of the Jaycees 10 outstanding young men in America in 1977.

The example of his comeback from total disability to a life of helping others has brought him other honors as well.

A director of the Magee Hospital in Philadelphia where Fr. Atkinson learned to live again said his case "illustrates the principle that you can't judge the potential for rehabilitation by the injury — you can only judge it by the patient."

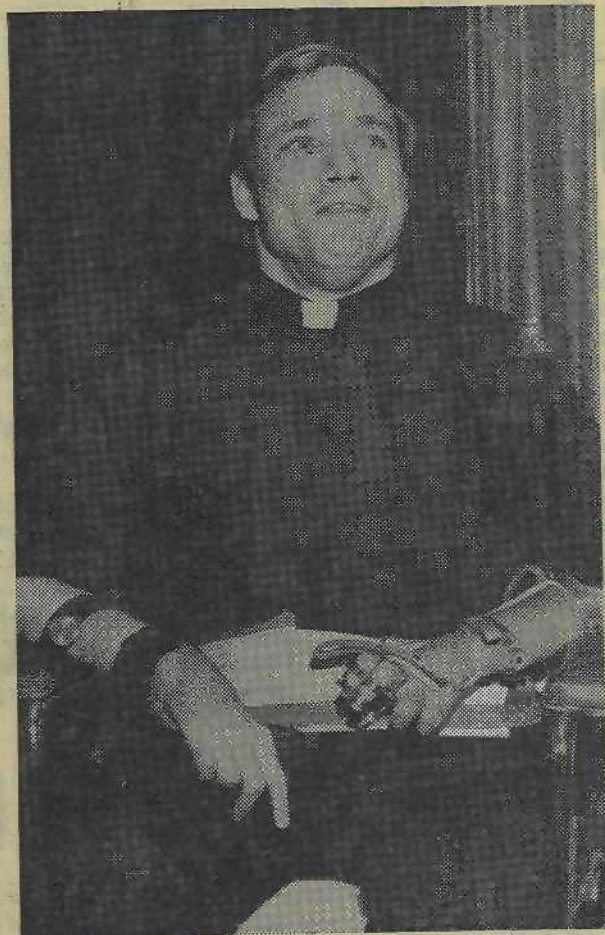
He now teaches high school at his alma mater Monsignor Bonner High School where an annual student award is presented in his honor.

Called the "Father Bill Atkinson Award," it is given to one student a year who displays an extraordinary degree of courage and dedication.



Atkinson said Thursday, on arrival in Las Vegas for the Jaycee awards presentation.

During the time he lay in a hospital bed trying to adjust to the fact he would never be able to move any of his muscles again without help, Atkinson's thoughts were reinforced by the Christian principle that life is a gift, something too precious to throw away in remorse, that life is something



Outstanding American

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Fr. Bill Atkinson, 31-year-old Catholic priest, is among 10 persons from around the nation who will receive the national Jaycee award as America's 10 outstanding young men of 1977. Awards will be presented Saturday night in the Aladdin Theatre for the Performing Arts. Fr. Atkinson, paralyzed from the neck down in a freak sledding accident while he was a seminarian, made a remarkable recovery through willpower and faith and now dedicates his life to helping others.

Appropriately, Fr. Bill was the first recipient.

His goal now is to become a hospital chaplain and continue his work with the sick and injured.

"In my short time in the hospital — and I consider 16

months a short time — I met some very lonely people who were totally without hope.

"It is these people I'd like to go back to and reassure them that they are loved and there is always hope," he said.

Holding the "Silver Hands" trophy of the Man Of The Year, John Heuiser joins his wife Sharon in sharing the joy of their honored nominee.

