



Bulletin Staff Photo by Jack Tinney

David Saccomandi, foreground, asks the Rev. William Atkinson a question at Bonner High School.

## Father Ack,' a Quadreplegic, Teaches Theology at High School

# Priest Turns Physical Handicap Into Asset

By JOSEPH P. BARRETT  
Of The Bulletin Staff

He is known as "Father Ack" to the students at Monsignor Bonner High School in Drexel Hill. And he has their respect.

"We all felt uptight in the beginning," one student said. "But now he's like any other teacher, except he can't write on the blackboard. He sits at his desk and reads his notes."

"The conduct is better in his class," another student joined in. "We can talk to him friend to friend. The kids don't do anything bad because he lets us do many things up to a point, but he doesn't lose control of his class."

Father Ack, whose formal name is the Rev. William E. Atkinson, is the first quadriplegic priest in the Catholic Church. Tomorrow is the second anniversary of the 30-year-old Augustinian's ordination.

### Toboggan Mishap

He has become a familiar sight in the halls of Monsignor Bonner through which he motors in an electrically powered wheelchair. He has turned his physical liabilities into assets to do the job his order gave him — teach a theology course to four classes of freshmen at the all-boy school.

Father Atkinson has been paralyzed from the neck down since a toboggan he was riding struck a tree on the grounds of the Augustinian Novitiate in New Hamburg, N.Y., on Washington's Birthday in 1965.

It seemed at the time he would have to forego his ambition to be a priest. But then the Prior Provincial of the Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova assured him he was still a member of the order and could continue his studies.

His ordination required a dispensation from Pope Paul VI which was granted late in 1973. The ordination services were held at St. Alice Church at Copley road and Walnut st., Upper Darby. John Cardinal Krol, archbishop of Philadelphia, noted that

Father Atkinson was not being offered the priesthood out of sympathy. This was actually a call to service.

"He certainly has fulfilled this requirement completely," the Rev. Harry J. Erdlen, superior of Monsignor Bonner, said last week.

### 'Pulls His Weight'

"He puts in a full day's work and pulls his weight. He is very conscientious. Hardship doesn't stop him. He doesn't spare himself in giving out assignments and he wants to be treated like everyone else."

Father Erdlen said Father Atkinson has had a fine impact on the community of priests at the school.

"He is one of those rare individuals who has achieved happiness despite poor health," Father Erdlen said. "He communicates a joy of living and makes you put your own problems into perspective."

Father Erdlen is one of a team of seven priests who rotate the duty of caring for Father Atkinson. They

wash and dress him in the morning and place him on the motorized wheelchair. Then the young priest is pretty much on his own.

Doctors at Magee Memorial Hospital, under the supervision of Dr. Frazier Parry, discovered some motion in the priest's shoulder muscles and invented two devices which enable him to move his arms somewhat.

One is a brace which fits on his forearm and is powered by carbon dioxide. It allows him to bring two fingers and his thumb together so that he can eat unassisted. The other is a brace which makes it possible for him to hold a brush for painting or a pencil with an eraser on the end which he uses for typing.

### Sports Enthusiast

A ruggedly handsome man with blue eyes, dark blond hair and sideburns, Father Atkinson breaks into a smile when asked how he will celebrate his second anniversary to the priesthood.

"I'll be in school that day and I assure you I'll be teaching and probably marking some exam papers," says.

Father Atkinson grades papers with a marking pen which he holds in his mouth. He is experimenting on the use of cigaret holders to hold the pen in his mouth. A good friend and former classmate, Brother Richard C. Fermann, director of St. Denis Cemetery in Ardmore Park, is rigging up a stand on which he can lay the pen to rest.

Life at the high school is not work for the priest, who also is a great sports enthusiast. His wheelchair can be found on the sidelines of Bonner High School football and basketball games.

Today he is philosophical about the accident that left him paralyzed.

"It is one of the bad breaks," says. "Everyone has his cross, whether it is physical, emotional or a family problem. They come in all sizes and don't think anyone is spared. It's part of life."