

Quadriplegic Near His Goal Of Becoming Catholic Priest

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Of The Bulletin Staff

It was a dry, wintry day without a cloud in the sky.

The ground was covered with fresh snow, the last of the year. It was Washington's Birthday 1965.

It was also the last day William E. Atkinson, then 19, was ever to walk. Now he is scheduled to become the first quadriplegic to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest in the United States.

That 1965 day, the students frolicked in the snow, shouting and hollering and tobogganing.

Two toboggans came down the quarter-mile hill, four youths on each. At the end of the run there was a line of trees.

The Accident

Atkinson, of Upper Darby was lead man in the first toboggan. A 1963 graduate of Monsignor Bonner High School, he had entered the Augustinian Novitiate in New Hamburg, N.Y., in fall 1964.

"I didn't know where I was going," he told a reporter last week in Mariarty Hall, Villanova University.

"The snow kind of blew up in my face. It was a light powdery snow. It was a 25-second ride, 30 seconds at most. We were near the trees and I decided to get off.

"I didn't see the tree. As I was going off, I hit the tree with the back of my neck. Someone told me it wasn't a very big tree."

Atkinson's neck was broken and he was paralyzed from the shoulders down. It seemed his ambition of becoming a priest was crushed.

The Good News

For a man in such a condition to be ordained would require a dispensation from Pope Paul VI.

Recently, Atkinson received the good news — Rome had granted a petition from the Very Rev. Harry A. Cassel, O.S.A., Provincial of the Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova, permitting Atkinson to be ordained.

"To our knowledge," Father Cassel said, "William Atkinson is the first quadriplegic to be ordained a priest in the United States."

He is to be ordained next Feb. 2 by John Cardinal Krol.

He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Allen J. Atkinson of 409 Sansom St., Bywood, Upper Darby. His father is a motorman on the Red Arrow Lines. An older brother, Al, is a line-backer for the New York Jets.

"Astounding"

Father Cassel said in his petition to Rome that medical specialists in charge of Atkinson's case described his recovery as "astounding" or "medically impossible."

"Doctors at the hospital felt that it was miraculous that he survived the accident and the trip to the hospital," Father Cassel wrote to the Pope. The trip, in a station wagon, took 45 minutes over unplowed roads.

"But they held little hope for his survival beyond a few hours or days," Father Cassel continued.

"He remained for several days in good spirits and fully conscious, despite the necessity of breathing devices and traction bolts screwed into his skull."

Then he caught pneumonia and stopped breathing on several occasions, "once for such a long time that the doctors felt that he was certainly dead."

"They counted me out a couple of times," Atkinson recalled, his ruggedly handsome face breaking out in a crooked grin. He has bright blue eyes



STUDYING FOR THE PRIESTHOOD at Villanova University, quadriplegic William E. Atkinson will be ordained in February.

"One time the doctor said 'that's it' and called the hospital morgue."

Regaining Motion

After six weeks at St. Francis Hospital in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., an ambulance from Upper Darby Fire Co. No. 1 brought him to Magee Memorial Hospital in Philadelphia, where he regained some motion in his shoulders. Using shoulder muscles, he now is able to raise his arms.

Doctors at Magee, led by Dr. Frazer Parry, made two devices which give him more use of his arms.

One is a brace which fits on his forearm and is powered by carbon dioxide. This enables him to bring two fingers and his thumb together so he can eat by himself. The other brace can hold a brush for painting or a pencil with an eraser on the end, which he uses for typing.

During the next year and a half at Magee, he was impressed by the people helping him.

"I had lots of time to reflect while I was lying on my back," he said, "I saw all of these people just responding to my needs. It was during this time that I put my life back together again with the help of my own family, the Augustinian Family and the tender, loving care I received at both hospitals. It was this response that encouraged me to keep on going forward; just to go on living. I just don't know when I made the decision to come back."

In the summer of 1966, the Rev. Joseph Keffer, O.S.A., master of the professed at the novitiate told Atkinson that if he wanted to continue studying for the priesthood, the Augustinian Order would help.

Atkinson felt he still had a vocation and decided to continue.

Six fellow seminarians

for Atkinson. They taught some 50 others. Eventually, all 140 seminarians had a hand in caring for Atkinson after he returned to the seminary.

"Although the doctors agreed that he would never move at all, he made amazing progress and proved a great example to the hospital and the Augustinians in the Philadelphia area," Father Cassel reported to Pope Paul. "Despite doctors' repeated assurances to the contrary, he soon began to move his arms and to be able to feed himself and to drive a motorized wheelchair."

To Villanova

In the fall of 1966, the paralyzed Atkinson went to Villanova.

"Get ready for a switch," Atkinson would call out. Several seminarians would lift him from his electrically powered wheelchair to a smaller, collapsible one.

Brother Richard Ekmann, O.S.A., a former classmate of Atkinson who was in charge of maintenance at the seminary, built ramps at the entrances. A sign near the drive said, "Watch out for wheelchair crossing."

Most of Atkinson's classes were in Bartley Hall, where he could use elevators to get from floor to floor. An anonymous donor provided a van with windows; when it was time to go someplace, the seminarians lifted him into the back of the van. Wherever they went, they took him along.

Extra Activities

Atkinson became a coach of one of the intramural football teams. He sped up and down the sidelines on his electric wheelchair, exhorting the players. He was elected a chairman of the sports committee of the seminary, ran

chores.

He spent one day a week at Valley Forge Army Hospital with soldiers paralyzed in Vietnam.

During this time, he taught a weekly class for Catholic public-school children at Our Mother of Good Counsel Church, Bryn Mawr, and led three retreats at Monsignor Bonner High School.

Atkinson will be ordained just one year behind his classmates.

He has been studying year-round. He was a familiar sight on the Ocean City boardwalk last summer, sitting in his wheelchair studying theology. In addition to classwork, he has been tutored by professors of the Graduate Theological Faculty of Villanova University. He has maintained a "B" average or better.

What's Next

Father Cassel said Atkinson has a future as a teacher and coach in the Augustinian order.

"However," he pointed out, "his great desire is to be a hospital chaplain. He sees his particular vocation of suffering as a great aid to his work in comforting the sick and bringing to them the peace of Jesus in their suffering."

Father Cassel said Atkinson would be able to celebrate Mass seated and with some training could baptize, anoint the sick and hear confessions.

"In my short time in the hospital — and I consider my 16 months a short time — I met very lonely people, people without hope. It is these people I'd like to go back to and reassure that somebody loves them and that there is always hope," Atkinson said as he sat in his wheelchair in the kitchen of his dormitory.

Speaking in a soft voice, almost to himself, he said:

"I could never have done it by myself. And so it goes, no