

# Upper Darby Quadriplegic First to Become Priest

Nine years ago this month, a robust young Roman Catholic seminarian stood atop a snow-covered hill, looking down at the quarter-mile slope toward the line of trees at the bottom, and anticipating the excitement of the toboggan run.

Thirty seconds later, he was at the bottom of the hill, his spinal cord smashed—and

with it, it seemed, his dream of becoming a priest.

But Saturday, William E. Atkinson, 28, of Upper Darby became the first quadriplegic to be ordained a priest in the United States.

When he was 19, Atkinson was paralyzed from the neck down in that toboggan accident at Good Counsel Novi-

tiate in New Hamburg, N. Y. He was the first man in a four-man sled that crashed into the trees.

"I didn't do a good job of steering," he says.

A stationwagon carried him to a Poughkeepsie, N. Y. hospital—an agonizing 45-minute ride over unplowed roads.

Doctors at the hospital were surprised he had survived at all and gave him little or no chance of recovery.

Nevertheless, after a six-week stay in the hospital, Atkinson transferred to the Magee Rehabilitation Center in Philadelphia to continue his convalescence. He was to stay there 14 months.

After his release, he enrolled in Villanova, repeating his first novitiate year there.

Members of the Order of St. Augustine told Atkinson they would help him every way they could if he decided to continue his studies for the priesthood, but they knew that for a man so handicapped to be ordained would require a dispensation from Pope Paul VI.

Last Oct. 6, Atkinson learned that Rome had granted a petition from the Very Rev. Harry A. Cassel, O.S.A., provincial of the Augustinian Order of St. Thomas of Villanova, to have him ordained.

"I was delighted," Atkinson

said Friday. "I was very excited."

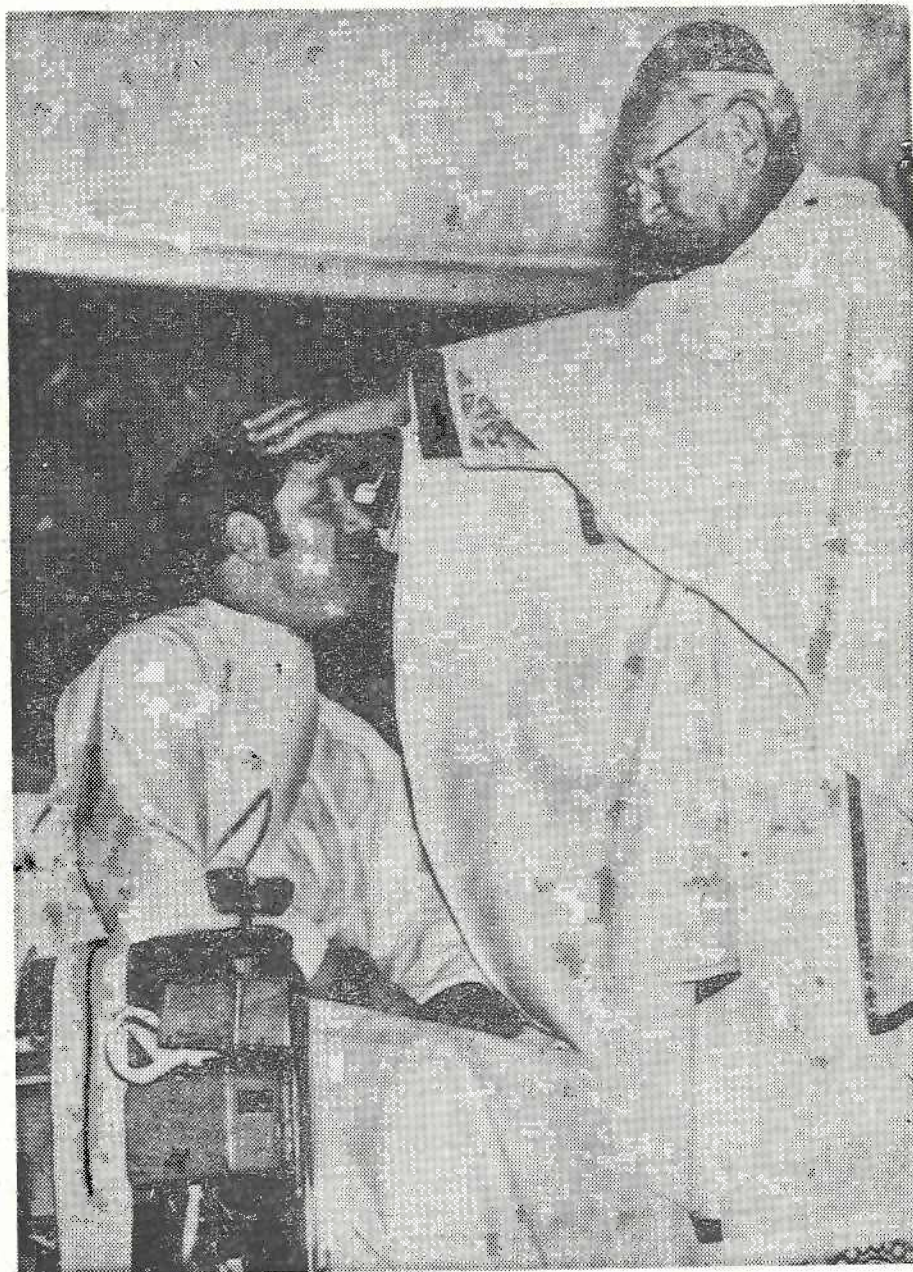
Atkinson, who has "no handicap in getting around" in a motorized wheelchair, was ordained by John Cardinal Krol. He did not know last week what his first assignment would be. One possibility was that he would become a chaplain in a hospital.

"I credit my friends, my family and my fellow Augustinians for reaching this point," the young candidate said. "Just thank them all for me."

Atkinson is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Allen J. Atkinson, of 409 Sansom st., Bywood, Upper Darby.

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—UPI-Courier-Post Telefax

CONFINED to wheelchair since sledding accident nine years ago, the Rev. William E. Atkinson, 28, is ordained by John Cardinal Krol Saturday in St. Alice Church, Upper Darby, Pa. Fr. Atkinson is first quadriplegic to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest; special permission was given by Pope Paul VI. Fr. Atkinson's brother, Al, is a middle linebacker for the New York Jets football team.