



Accident leads priest, avid sportsman to become great

# fisher of men

Using his thumbs and his two working fingers, Father Tom McKinney lifts the host during a quarterly anointing of the sick service at St. Ann's Home in northwest Grand Rapids.

He sits in an elevated wheelchair as he encourages the 75 or so residents gathered – nearly half of them in wheelchairs themselves, lining the side aisles of the nursing home chapel – to join their sufferings to those of Jesus.

“We bring our illnesses and deteriorations of the various parts of our body to the Lord,” said Father McKinney. “Wouldn’t that be nice if we all had the grace to rejoice in our suffering? It takes great grace of God to do that,” he added, with a knowing smile.

Father McKinney, 77, an avid sportsman paralyzed from the chest down in a tree-cutting accident in December 1997, is a living example of what he preaches to his elderly parishioners. Though his hands are partially paralyzed, he has enough strength to lift the Eucharist with his thumb and forefinger; he uses his palm to maneuver his 150-pound wheelchair, bringing the healing oils to those unable to come forward for the blessing.

Although the accident robbed Father McKinney of his

physical abilities, it has strengthened him spiritually, he and those who know him say.

Father McKinney serves as de-facto chaplain at St. Ann's, saying Mass, encouraging residents facing a host of ailments, and coming to the bedsides of those who are dying. He works part-time at nearby Holy Trinity Catholic Church, where he serves as associate pastor and celebrates Mass, which are well-attended by people with disabilities.

"As a priest you feel kind of dumb saying you're astonished at what God's grace within you can do," said Father McKinney when asked how his faith helps him keep going. "I just see God's grace as so active in me. It helps me do all these things."

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### The accident

On Dec. 15, 1997, Father McKinney had been visiting a cottage north of Baldwin that he co-owns with other priests when he decided to cut down a tree for firewood. He felt the ground vibrate when his tree went down. Then another falling tree struck him on the head, taking most of his scalp with it. "The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground. I remember saying, 'Oh, my legs are going numb.'" He felt a rush of air as he was airlifted to Spectrum Butterworth in Grand Rapids. He awoke from a coma 10 days later on Christmas Day.

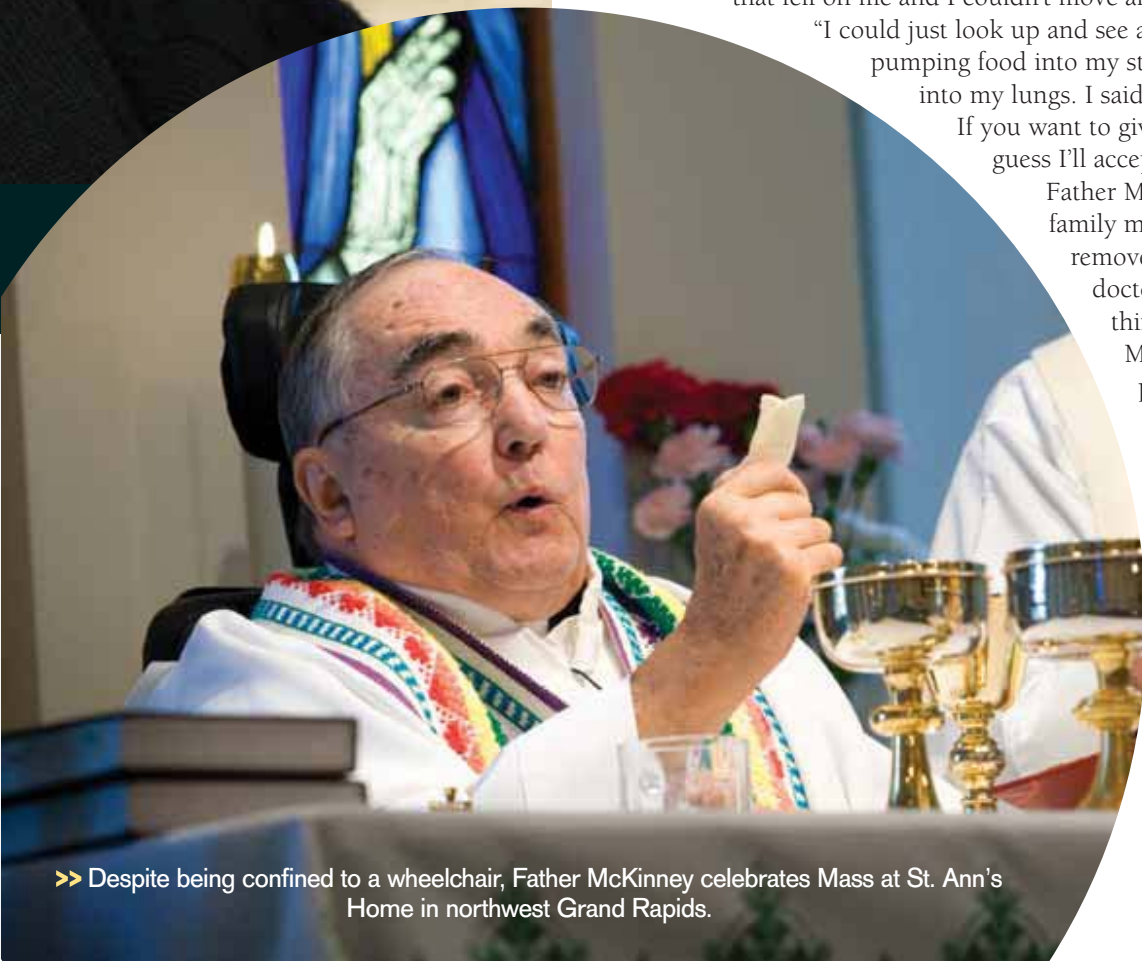
"I felt like I had just been through a tornado and there was a house that fell on me and I couldn't move anything," he recalled.

"I could just look up and see a little light. They were pumping food into my stomach and pumping air into my lungs. I said, 'Well Lord, it's Christmas. If you want to give me a Christmas present I guess I'll accept your eternal life.'"

Father McKinney then asked his family members to have the tubes removed and to let him die. His doctor, however, had another thing in mind. He told Father McKinney he had too much potential life ahead of him. Gradually, Father McKinney improved. After three weeks in the hospital, he moved to Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids.

### 'A fisher of men'

One day, during his stay at Mary Free Bed, he noticed a pewter statue of St. Peter holding a net on his bedside table. "I looked



>> Despite being confined to a wheelchair, Father McKinney celebrates Mass at St. Ann's Home in northwest Grand Rapids.



➤ Father McKinney presides over Mass at St. Ann's Home attended by residents, including Maxine Falls (left) and Irene Pawloski (bottom photo).

over at that and the Lord gave me the notion that, 'Tom, I called you to be a fisher of men and I'll make you a fisher of men again.' I said, 'Ok, we'll see what happens,'" recalled Father McKinney.

**“I've always felt like I'm going to serve the Lord as long as I've got life. I see eternity as the true life.”**

At first he could barely speak. For the first three months he could not swallow or use his hands very well. The first time she visited him at Mary Free Bed, longtime friend and Mercy Sister Rosemary Smith remembers how proud he was to be able to hold a pencil. Within three weeks, he could print his name and the words, “God is good.” After three months of therapy, he moved to St. Ann's assisted living, where he still resides today. Since then Father McKinney has made remarkable progress. After two hand surgeries, he has enough strength to raise a host during Mass and to hold a prayer book. His voice and his arms are stronger.

The paralysis, however, brings daily challenges. Father McKinney tires and needs two naps a day. He requires caregivers to help him get up, shower, get dressed and go to bed. “I don't have a lot of productive time left in my day,” he said.

What time Father McKinney has, he uses well. At St. Ann's, he says Mass on Wednesdays, offers confession once a month and leads a quarterly anointing service. He also celebrates Mass at Holy Trinity on Tuesdays and three of four Sundays and visits the school children. He spends an hour praying and preparing homilies in the morning and, in the evenings, visits his brother Joseph McKinney, who lives at St. Ann's and is also a priest.

Within a year of the accident, Father

McKinney called Rev. Dan DePew, then the pastor at Holy Trinity Parish, to offer to help there.

“I knew he was in a wheelchair,” recalls Father DePew. “I did not know the energy that man and the love that man had.”

At Holy Trinity, he has been well-received, and has brought a greater awareness about people with disabilities to the congregation. A team of volunteers helps Father McKinney put on his vestments before Mass; parishioners built a ramp system for him and the diocese modified the altar.

“That's another real grace – the way God motivates people to help me blows my mind,” said Father McKinney. “They'll very often say they get more out of helping me than they put into it. I say ‘Thank you Lord.’”

Still a lover of nature, Father McKinney gets outside every day to exercise by pushing his manual wheelchair around the grounds. Holy Trinity parishioner and St. Ann's resident John Boenheim jokes that he'll occasionally be awakened from his nap by Father McKinney using his bird caller while he feeds the crows and squirrels.



Boenheim, who is struck by Father McKinney's humble attitude and graciousness, said he ministers to the people at St. Ann's every day whether saying Mass or joking with them in the dining room.

"It's a joy to be with the man," said Boehheim, 85, who often drives Father McKinney to Holy Trinity. "I think that he's an example of a man of deep faith."

He still fishes up at the cabin; this past summer, he was able to visit once a month. The logistics take some doing: a friend will often drive him out, family will come and help with groceries, and caregivers help Father McKinney get in and out of bed. He still loves fishing, but now needs someone to help bait his hook, take the fish off and cook them.

### 35 reasons he is a better priest

Father Tom once thought he could not live without his former loves – skiing, swimming, hunting and even rollerblading. "I would say I had the grace to just let go of what I couldn't do anymore," he says now. "I don't consider that real hard."

Sister Rosemary, for whom Father McKinney has been a spiritual mentor since they met at St. Francis Xavier 40 years ago, still marvels at the way he accepted the loss of the active life he had lived before. "He's a man of deep faith, deep spirituality," says Sister Rosemary, who drives him to Holy Trinity on Sundays and prepares a Sunday meal. "He's a man of total surrender."

About four years ago, during Lent, Father McKinney decided to leave lunch five minutes early each day to visit the chapel and pray about what God was doing in his life.

"I came up with 35 reasons why the accident was good for me spiritually," he recalls. "Number one it made my priesthood more effective," noting that people tell him they are inspired by his willingness to continue saying Mass from his wheelchair. And not having other distractions – like hunting and all the active things he used to do – has enabled him to focus more on prayer. "So it's been good for my spiritual life." He also feels assured of a higher place in heaven.

Even as he continues to minister, Father McKinney faces health challenges. About once a year or so, he finds himself hospitalized and he has teetered between life and death 10 or 11 times. He is at peace with dying. "I've always felt like I'm going to



serve the Lord as long as I've got life," he said. "I see eternity as the true life."

As long as he is alive and able, however, Father McKinney plans to continue to be a "fisher of men." He believes God's primary work through him now is "encouraging people who have difficulties. A lot of people tell me I'm an inspiration to them."

That is certainly true at St. Ann's, said Carmelite Sister Gabriela Hilke, admissions director. "He's very accepting, very uplifting to the other residents in their disabilities."

Mary Beth O'Rourke, Father McKinney's niece, said that her uncle continues to be an inspiration to her family; he baptizes the babies and enjoys time with his many nieces and nephews on the holidays or at the cabin.

"He truly does feel that he's still here to serve the Lord. He still has work to do," O'Rourke said.

Father DePew jokes that he wishes he could have fired him from Holy Trinity and hired him at St. Mary's in Spring Lake, where he was transferred this past summer. He believes that the accident has made Father McKinney a better priest.

"He grew in holiness. He really did," said Father DePew. "Most guys would have packed it in. All the priests are in awe of him too." ☩



» Ever the outdoorsman, Father McKinney enjoys feeding the wildlife around his home.