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Mr. Zywicki is a Roman Catholic deacon who has been disabled for 21 of his 38 years, with chronic rheumatoid arthritis. In addition to his ministry with the disabled, he is a former newspaper editor and public relations director for the city of Bayonne, New Jersey. He is currently the editor and publisher of The Itinerary, a magazine for travelers with disabilities.

CUSA — the Catholic Union of the Sick in America — is a group correspondence apostolate for the handicapped, chronically ill and physically disabled. Its 1,100 members reside throughout the 50 states, Canada and Mexico and provide a wide spectrum of disabilities and illnesses, ages, backgrounds and experiences. The organization fulfills a need for the disabled or sick to share their ups and downs with other individuals who will understand.

Each member belongs to a group of eight persons who keep in touch with each other on a regular basis through a group letter. A group leader and a spiritual advisor help maintain a positive and spiritual atmosphere in the group letter at all times, occasionally suggesting topics for general discussion.

"Close relationships develop within a group," reported Anna Marie Sopko of Bayonne, N.J. Anna Marie, who is confined to a wheelchair because of cerebral palsy and arthritis, is the national administrative leader for CUSA. She explained, "Members find support and understanding through the group letters, as well as courage when pain is frustrating or circumstances difficult."

She said through the direction of the group's spiritual advisor — a priest or deacon — and through the support of each other, the members are helped to sanctify their sufferings by accepting them patiently and offering them to God in union with the sufferings of Christ for the welfare of others. This purpose is demonstrated by CUSA's motto, "We suffer for a purpose."

Those who have already "found" CUSA, willingly give testimony to the positive effect the organization has had on their lives.

"CUSA inspires me to keep on trying," explained 20-year-old Mary Kay Weber of Chamberlain, S.D. "I think it helps a lot and I've gotten a lot out of it. CUSA is people loving each other and praying for each other. You don't have to hope for that. . . . you know it."

Mary Kay was going to graduate from high school. When she was 3, doctors discovered she had myositis ossificans, a rare disease that turns muscles into bone. Only about 400 people in the world have this illness. Since fourth grade, she has studied at home with a tutor.

"God is There"

"God is there," she advises others, especially those in her age group. "Prayer helps. And, through CUSA you'll get to know more people."

Seventy-three year old Ruth McDonald of St. Petersburg, Fla. eagerly proclaims CUSA as, "The joy of my life in the autumn of my life."

A former college and nursing teacher, Mrs. McDonald was encouraged by a friend 38 years ago to join CUSA because of her congenital hip disorder, but she said she didn't consider herself disabled. In 1979, she developed a heart disorder and joined CUSA the following year, saying, "I think the Lord was trying to show me something."

A widow since 1967, Mrs. McDonald reports, "CUSA is the most wonderful thing that has happened in my life. I was so active and then saw my life screeching to a halt. CUSA gives me a purpose — to be contemplative and to help others." Mrs. McDonald is a group leader and recently became a section leader, which comprises 10 groups.

Thomas Maxwell, a paraplegic disabled in World War II, said he likes CUSA because it helps him to fulfill himself. He said it helps give him a spiritual foothold and serves as a type of substitute, since architectural barriers prevent him from getting to Mass as often as he would like.

The Cohoes, New York resident is a group leader and former section leader. In spite of being confined to a wheelchair, he likes to do volunteer work. He noted, "CUSA helps you get closer to your faith. It gives you a reason for suffering. When I found CUSA in 1956, I decided that since I was going to be this way, why not make it pay off and spiritualize it?"

Rev. William A. Michell, retired superior general of the Paulists, has

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been a Cusan for about 17 years as a spiritual advisor. “CUSA provides a means to help these poor souls carry their cross,” he said. “I have the greatest admiration for its work and the way they help the disabled.”

Although not disabled, Father Michell has recently been affected by arthritis. The priest, who serves five groups and has been a Cusan for about 17 years, said, “Because of my experiences with other Cusans, the little trials I now have make me realize how they have to suffer.” Father Michell resides in Pasadena, California.

He was joined by the Rev. William Wolkovich of Norwood, Massachusetts, who urged other priests and deacons to become spiritual advisors. Father Wolkovich said his CUSA experience has reinforced my previous apostolate with the sick in hospitals and offers me a way of expressing my concern for them through a different sphere—through the mail.

Father Wolkovich, who joined CUSA 17 years ago after reading an article about it in a priests’ magazine, urged diocesan priests and deacons to encourage their clergymen to get involved.

Mr. and Mrs. George Hernandez of Dallas, Texas are both Cusans, he for 17 years and she for seven. Both have cerebral palsy and are confined to wheelchairs, but they have set up house in their own apartment with the help of a visiting homemaker.

George, 38 and Debra, 33, find that CUSA helps them communicate with other disabled individuals and to share their common experiences and thereby find help, solace and spiritual consolation.

**CUSA ‘Opened New World’**

Sister Anna Lawrence said joining CUSA “opened a new world” and encouraged her to get involved in a new apostolate, helping the blind.

The nun, who belongs to the Congregation of St. Joseph, had lost her sight for a year just before making her final vows. Though now sighted, but suffering from a bone disease called osteoporosis, she has dedicated herself to making Braille transcripts and publishes a spiritual magazine. She started Braille groups for CUSA and still maintains two groups which correspond by means of cassette tapes, rather than by letter.

“CUSA has helped me meet wonderful people . . . it has given me a great purpose in life.” The Brentwood, New York nun, who has been a Cusan since 1962, said CUSA does not offer proselytizing—just friendship.

Mrs. Odessa Finley, an 85-year old grandmother from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, noted, “CUSA is not just a pen-pal club for shut-ins. It is a lay apostolate in which we can cooperate with God in sharing our crosses with others and helping them to offer up their sufferings.” She said it helps bring a closeness with the Lord and with His sufferings.

Mrs. Finley, who received a back injury in an auto accident in 1957, has been a Cusan for 24 years. “It encourages me to get out and help others,” she said.

Brother Bernard Bishop, a novice at St. Mary’s Friary in Columbus, Ohio, is not disabled himself. He read about CUSA a year ago and decided to get involved as a spiritual advisor because of illness in his family.

The 29-year old Franciscan, who aspires to the priesthood, said CUSA “has been a great strength for me.” He particularly enjoys the confidence and the shared feelings between him and the members of his group, both in the group letters and in personal correspondence.

“It’s a great apostolate,” Brother Bishop said. “It is something that really doesn’t take up that much time. I have no problems keeping up with the group letter and personal correspondence in spite of a busy schedule that includes other apostolates.”

Besides the group letter, all members receive “THE CUSAN,” a semi-annual magazine written and edited by Cusans. The organization also sponsors days of recollection which are held in various parts of the country. The use of the CUSA Tape Library is available to all members having a tape recorder. For the group letter, stationery is provided free.

Although CUSA is an American organization, it was patterned after a similar organization in Europe. Mrs. Robert Brunner, who immigrated from Belgium in 1939, was encouraged by her friends to begin a branch of their apostolate in America. CUSA officially began on Dec. 8, 1947 and has been run ever since by its ill and disabled members.

For more detailed information about CUSA and how to become a member, write: CUSA, Dept. B, 176 West 8th Street, Bayonne, N.J. 07002.