
Tools

*Br. Jerry Menkhaus, SJ, is a
builder of buildings and lives*

of the Trade

by Peter Feuerherd

IT'S A HEADY spring day, the time when young men's thoughts turn to things other than schoolwork. Jesuit brother Jerry Menkhaus is teaching his young charges at Nativity Mission Center on Manhattan's Lower East Side about the workings of the universe. The talk about the life cycle of stars is as all-encompassing as eighth-grade science gets.

Despite the lure of our nearest star after a long winter, Brother Jerry, as he is known to Nativity's 60 students, gets his points across. These students are becoming well-versed in the esoterica of supernovas, brown dwarfs, nebulae, and other basic astronomy.

They are learning from a scientist who absorbed most of what he knows from hands-on work in Jesuit mission fields as varied as Micronesia and Nigeria, and they are better for it. But he wasn't always teaching junior high school boys.

Born in Milwaukee, Menkhaus moved to the New York area with his family and joined the Jesuits right out of Fordham Prep in the Bronx back in '61. He recalls that at that time being a Jesuit brother "was light years apart from what I'm doing now."

In his early years in the community, he remembers, brothers were akin to the stage crew of a Broadway show. Though instrumental, they worked quietly offstage, making sure that the actors in the drama had everything they needed.

"That was what I was attracted to," says Menkhaus about his early years as a Jesuit, but over the years the roles that brothers have played have changed considerably. Nowadays, they are more likely to be on the front lines of teaching and other assignments, as is Menkhaus.

Back in his early Jesuit years, Menkhaus was assigned to the tutelage of Br. Ed Moran, SJ, an engineer who was pivotal in overseeing construction projects run by the New York Province. Menkhaus, tapped as a worthy successor to Moran, was sent to study at the University of Detroit Mercy, where he earned a bachelor's and then a master's in civil engineering.

By the time he graduated, however, the boom years of Jesuit building projects in the province were just about over. He

became a math teacher at Saint Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J., and then director of institutional research there.

He was then sent to Micronesia, where he worked as a teacher. Then, at the request of the bishop, he was asked to oversee the renovation and conversion of a girls' dormitory into a convent for a group of missionary sisters. Next, he was asked to tackle the construction of a rectory in the Marshall Islands, where he became not only the supervisor but also the plumbing and electrical contractor who ended up doing a lot of that hands-on work himself.

He returned to New York to teach math at Regis High School, but in 1990 he was called upon to go to Nigeria to supervise more construction. Among other projects, he had a hand in the development of a retreat center, a novitiate, and a high school, the budget for which topped \$8 million.

For his work on these projects, Menkhaus was named the recipient of the 1996 Xavier Award at the Jesuit Mission Dinner, given by the New York Province for exemplary service to the community.

"I'm the one who probably spent more of the money that you contributed than any other Jesuit missionary," he told the Jesuit benefactors at the event.



Br. Menkhaus has handled a raft of hands-on construction projects, from a rectory in Micronesia to a high school in Nigeria. Read "No Small Dreams" in *Company's* Fall '97 issue: www.companymagazine.org/v151/dreams.html



Menkhaus's Jesuit vocation plays out nowadays in a classroom at the Nativity Mission Center on Manhattan's Lower East Side. His science classes help middle schoolers prepare for the challenges of college prep schools.

Pioneering school

Now, as a middle-school teacher, he is building lives instead of buildings at Nativity Mission Center. It is a pioneer educational enterprise in which nearly 60 middle-school students attend all-day classes followed by supervised night study, as well as a summer education camp in the mountains and lakes near Lake Placid in upstate New York. There they learn about politeness and social decorum; when an adult visitor comes to class, students make sure to introduce themselves, a bit of etiquette sure to help them later in life. That focus on the entire life is also inherent in Menkhaus's teaching. He expands upon textbook knowledge to illustrate the wide world of knowledge earned both through his study and hands-on experience.

"For me, math is not something I have to learn in order to pass tests. I use it as a tool," he says about his own engineering experience, which he is able to bring into the classroom and illustrate how numbers have an impact on the real world.

Sometimes students wonder why he brings in so much mathematics into his science classes. He tries to communicate that, like God's creation, math and science can be seen as complementary, not rigidly separate.

Menkhaus realizes that middle-school education is very different from high school and college education. "In college and high school, you teach subjects," he says. "As you move down in grade level, you teach people."

At home

Menkhaus finds comfort in the community of Jesuits he lives with near Regis High School on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The close to three dozen Jesuits there, including Fr. Vin De Cola, Nativity Mission's president, have become his family, Menkhaus says. Wherever he goes, he will hook into the life of a Jesuit community, even though he doesn't know what the future might hold.

"I haven't been good at predicting," he says about his Jesuit vocation, which has taken him around the world and through varied works. This modest brother, whatever happens, plans to be of service to his community.

"I have no clue about the future. I will just keep going until the provincial says to do something else," he says. **C**



Peter Feuerherd, a freelance writer, works in communications for the Jesuits' New York Province. He is the author of *Holyland USA: A Catholic Ride through America's Evangelical Landscape* (Crossroad 2006, this fall).