

The Middle of Everywhere: Encountering God in the Islands of Micronesia

By Dennis Baker, nSJ



Experiences outside of the novitiate, known as “experiments,” form an integral part of formation for novices. These experiences can be in high schools, colleges, hospitals, parishes or any other place the Director of Novices believes will be a good fit for the novice, and are designed to test the novice’s call to the Lord and verify his maturity and freedom proper to his vocation. Novices oscillate from long periods at St. Andrew Hall in Syracuse to stints “on the road.”

On experiment, I have been sent to Gloucester, Massachusetts; Guadalajara, Mexico; the Bronx, New York; Denver, Colorado, and many smaller trips to other places in between—all in the space of about 15 months. Indeed, there have been times in the past year and a half when I woke up in the middle of the night and forgot what city it was. The “Long Experiment” is a time when a second year novice leaves the novitiate for an extended period to work in a Jesuit apostolate full-time. The Long Experiment lasts about five months and, as such, it is the longest period of time in one place during novitiate.

For my Long Experiment, I have been sent to Xavier High School, on the island of Weno, in the State of Chuuk, in the Federated States of Micronesia. “Micronesia” is a Greek term meaning “small islands.” Micronesia encompasses the islands of the Pacific Ocean east of the Philippines and, for the most part, north of the equator. It comprises more than 2,000 islands with a total land area of about 1,055 square miles. None of these islands (except for Guam) is much larger than about 12 square miles. Micronesia includes the Northern Mariana Islands, the Palau Islands, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Guam, and the Federated States of Micronesia. The Federated States are the Chuuk Islands, the Yap islands, the Pohnpei islands, and Kosrae.



Micronesia has been mission territory for the Society of Jesus since the 1920s. Xavier High School has been a mission of the New York Province since the school’s inception in 1952 after World War II. The main school building is, actually, on the site of a major Japanese communication center during the war. It is a building made almost completely of heavy concrete, with thick steel doors and shutters over the windows. The building survived two direct hits by American bombs during the war, and one of the sites where a bomb breached the roof is still visible – the rebar is bent in many different directions and the concrete has been patched. Chuuk lagoon was the site of a major naval battle during the war, and many Japanese naval vessels lie on the ocean floor there. The lagoon is, as the Chuukese like to say, a “scuba diver’s paradise.”



My duties at the school are teaching freshman religion and helping the director of the school, Arthur Leger, SJ, revamp the religion curriculum for freshmen. Before I entered the Society, I attended a Jesuit high school and later taught at one, so I am familiar with the way Jesuit schools operate. Things run a little differently out here, however. Xavier draws students from all across the Pacific, and therefore all male students board on campus. Female students who are not from Weno live with host families on the island. The Jesuits here are from Jersey City, San Diego, Fiji,

Indonesia, and Japan. The American faculty members, consisting mostly of members of Jesuit Volunteers International, are from Buffalo, Billings, Detroit, Greenwich, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. The Micronesian faculty has representatives from Chuuk, Yap, and Pohnpei. There are also two Australian volunteers who are recent graduates of the Jesuit high school in Sydney. Lilly, the school treasurer, is from the Philippines.

The international flavor of the school is not the only feature that differentiates Xavier from my former teaching experiences. The students, for example, do not wear uniforms, there is no PA system and none of the classrooms are connected. The bell to change classes is physically rung (using an attached rope) by a freshman. Books for students are at a premium and most are more than a little “weathered.” Although the temperature reaches the upper 80s almost daily and the humidity will keep the sweat dripping from sunrise to sunset, the classrooms are not air-conditioned. The faculty dress code is shorts and a shirt with a collar; and shoes are not worn in the classrooms by students or teachers.

Passing a full classroom, one will find a large pile of flip flops (or “zories” as they are called by islanders) outside the door. Students from each of the island groups construct huts typical of their islands—made of coconut wood and leaves—on the side of the campus facing the lagoon.



Each separate island group in Micronesia has its own language, and each is quite distinct from the rest. Therefore, all classes are conducted in English and students are required to speak English at all times. This helps promote school unity, as well as aid the students in becoming evermore fluent in English, as most of the colleges they will attend will be English-speaking. Many students head off to the bright lights of Hawaii or the West Coast of the U.S. for college.

Living conditions in the Jesuit community are not palatial by any means, but certainly do not impede to the work. There is no hot water for showers (by “shower” I mean a tap and a bucket

to dump water over your head), no TV, no radio, no current newspapers or magazines (not even within a month), and the Internet is dial-up (gasp!). The beds are metal frames covered with a piece of plywood and a four-inch foam pad. The power switches from the school generator to “island power” quite often and therefore we sometimes go without electricity for long stretches, even during the school day. (Lately, the power has been going off at midnight and not returning until about 7:30 a.m., which doesn’t allow me to run my fan while I sleep.)

These are all minor adjustments, and after about a week, I realized that this is “just the way it is” out here. Through living more simply than I ever have, I have quickly come to realize that my world will not come crashing down on me if I don’t have my usual comforts. I don’t really need, in the true sense of the word, two feet of padding to sleep on, like in my bed back at the novitiate; the Metro section of the New York Times before dinner; constant contact through phone calls and e-mails; or ESPN Radio while falling asleep. I still sleep soundly, I read more books, my Diet Coke has been replaced by milk straight from a coconut, and the rest of the world continues to spin even if I’m not engulfed by every bit of news flowing from the plethora of media outlets talked about so much by, well, the media. I can also teach a pretty good class without the use of PowerPoint, a high-speed copier/stapler, or the Internet. Being around the students and imparting knowledge produces the same high in me as it did when I taught in the States. On the weekend, snorkeling on the reef with the tropical fish, sharks, stingrays – and other faculty members – has become an appealing exchange for the “comforts” I can get so attached to back home. The soft, Pacific breezes of February are also much easier to shovel than the long, snow-covered driveway of the novitiate.



God is clearly out here in these islands and at this school. I try not to let a day go by without thanking God for giving me this opportunity. Thinking back on my first night in the novitiate, I had no idea that (1) I had the ability to be missioned to a place like this, and (2) that all the events from that first night until now would be so life-changing. To serve in a place where so many great Jesuits have served is truly humbling.



To serve in a place with such an influence over the entire Pacific Ocean is also an honor. To be with students whose experience of a Jesuit high school is so much different from my own, yet to be linked by the dreams of Ignatius, is truly a sign of the boldness of the Jesuits who founded this school and all the generous people who have worked here since. If not for my vocation to the Society, there is no way I would be here to experience a life and a culture so very different from what I have known before now. If not for my relationship with one whose name the Society bears, there is no way I would be as happy as I

am way out here “in the middle of nowhere.” If there is one thing I have learned after my short time in the Society, it is this: God is in the middle of everywhere.