

# He Shepherds A Tough Flock

By Joe Clark

Daily News Staff Writer

**F**rancis Menei is a con's man. Twenty-four hours a day, 7 days a week. He never stops.

Father Menei is a prison chaplain. His flock includes some of the meanest, nastiest, baaaaadest sheep that ever grazed behind the walls of Graterford and Holmesburg prisons.

And if numbers are any indication, the personable prison padre is a pretty successful shepherd. He packs them in at Mass Saturday evening and Sunday morning, and gets a good turnout for Graterford's annual communion breakfast.

And Graterford's Holy Name Society — a social and fraternal organization — is the largest in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Menei, a priest for 23 of his 51 years, was teaching freshman and sophomore religion at Cardinal Dougherty High School in Northeast Philadelphia when Cardinal John Krol unexpectedly tapped him for the prison ministry.

That was a little over 11 years ago.

And now ... ?

"Now, I wouldn't give it up for the world," said Menei recently, sitting on a bench in a noisy, busy Graterford corridor reflecting on his ministry behind walls.

"You hear the expression that when a person comes into prison they find God," said Menei. "Many times it's true. It's a normal reaction. When tragedy comes into a person's life the average person turns to God.

"Coming into prison is frightening for so many people. It's on the same level as a tragedy. Fright forced them to God."

Menei said his work at both Graterford and the city's penal institutions (he's the only

chaplain who administers to both systems) is rewarding and satisfying.

"I always had a desire to work with people nobody wanted to work with," said Menei, who was born and raised in South Philadelphia.

"I've never felt more like a priest than I do in this institution. These people are the most forgotten, most unwanted ... I feel I fill a need here. I play the role of parent, big brother, friend. It gives me a feeling of satisfaction."

Menei smiles when he tells how inmates sometimes think they're "conning" him into doing them favors, like using his office phone to check on their "sick" mother.

"I know they're conning me, but I allow it to happen just to let them see the goodness and kindness of the church," said Menei. "But before they leave, I let them know I'm aware of what's going on.

"If they want to con a little bit out of me, that's OK," he added. "If they're happy, I can work with them."

But there's no conning around with Graterford's 110-member strong Holy Name Society. Each of the 303 parishes in the archdiocese usually has such a Catholic men's group, but none, says Menei, has as many active members as Graterford.

"We're the largest active society in the archdiocese," said Menei. "The men are dedicated to doing charitable works for the honor and glory of God's holy name.

Menei has a million and one stories about the "forgotten" men he's met and counseled over the last 11 years.

One of the forgotten he remembers the most.

"I just started here," said Menei. "There was this one guy who was heavy on drugs, had committed a couple of robberies. He was in and out of jail for years and his girlfriend broke off with him. He really loved her. I visited her and convinced her to start visiting him again. She did. Four years later he got out.

"A year later I got a call. It was him. He said they were getting married and wanted me to perform the wedding ceremony. I remember it was in a church in Tacony. They moved to Florida. He became a plumber.

"Two, three years, after that I received a plane ticket in the mail. It was from them. They wanted me to come down to Florida and baptize their child. To this day I am very, very close to that child, and his parents."



Menei