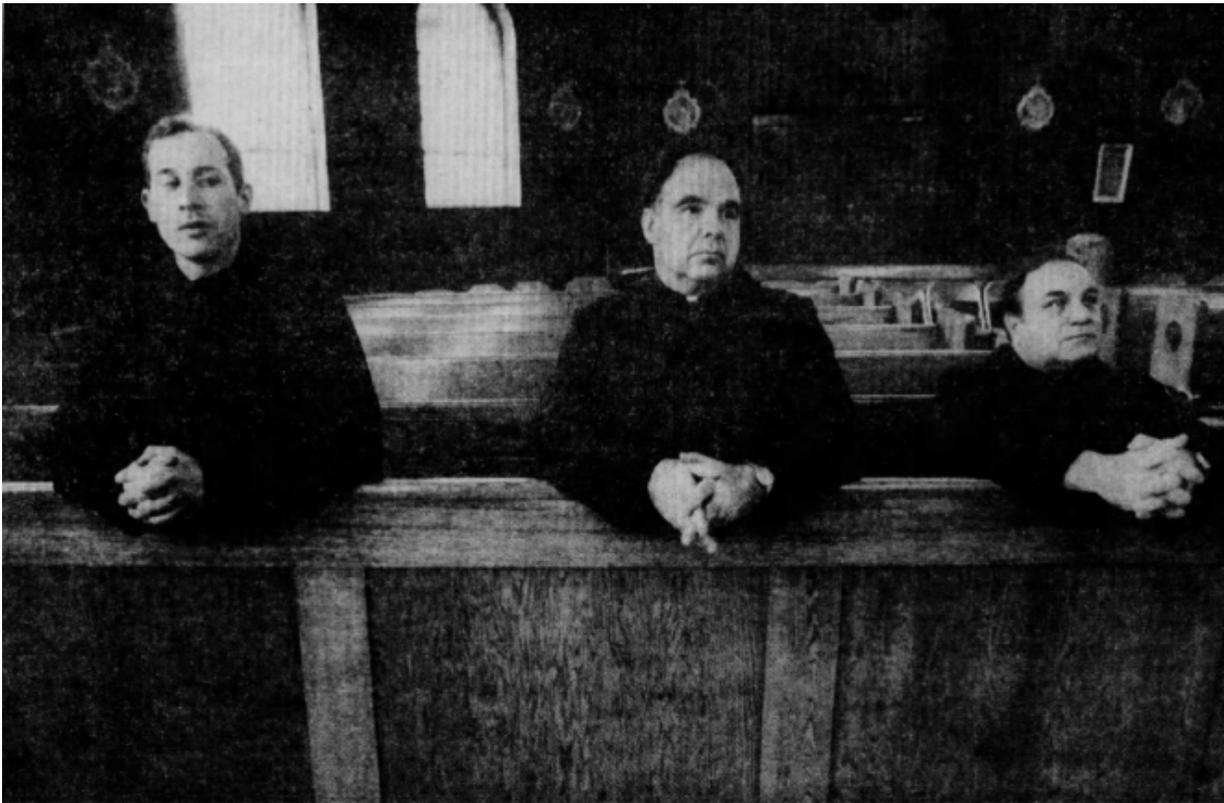


“Building a Church and a Radical Vision” - By Anemona Hartocollis

The Philadelphia Inquirer - Wednesday December 04, 1985

Article on Joseph Natale



In the chapel at the Most Holy Family Monastery in Pine Hill are (from left) Brother John Vennari, Brother Thomas Wedekind, and Joseph Natale, brother superior. Natale founded the monastery 18 years ago and continues his work today despite Church opposition.

Note: This 1985 newspaper article found in "The Philadelphia Inquirer" further supports the position, that Joseph Natale (1927-1995), the founder of the Most Holy Family Monastery:

- Petitioned for but was officially denied “canonical provision” to start his religious community,
- Contradicts his previous claim made on July 9, 1975 (in the Daily Journal) that he spent one year 1960-61 at St. Vincent’s Benedictine Abbey in Latrobe, PA., in a postulancy, or candidate’s program, that did not involve formal instruction or religious vows.

967 Canon 7: “If anyone says that ... those who have been neither rightly ordained nor sent by ecclesiastical and canonical authority, but come from a different source, are lawful ministers of the word ...: let him be anathema [cf. n. 960].” - **Denzinger:** Sources of Catholic Dogma

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Pine Hill - Leaning on his crutches, Joseph Natale surveys the monastery that he founded and began building 18 years ago in Pine Hill. He sees the ramshackle farm house, surrounded by a cluster of buildings, many unfinished. Natale, a self-taught architect, designed the freestanding arches in the courtyard, the field stone facades and timber beams.

From a distance, it looked like a thriving community. Up close, it turned out to be nearly empty. Natale, the brother superior, and two other monks live in 30 rooms in seven buildings.

In his mind and in the literature that he uses to solicit funds, Natale foresees a different place. He imagines the 90-foot-long church – now rows of metal studs covered with a pitched roof – filled with people praying. He imagines the 162-foot-long social hall – where sheet rock alternates with exposed insulation – filled with bingo players. He imagines men running the gleaming steel machines in the bakery. He imagines the 40 year-old offset printing press clanking. He imagines central heating to replace the three kerosene stoves that keep the dormitories warm in winter. Most of all; he imagines an army of monks.

While he imagines all these things he continues sketching new buildings and attempts to recruit volunteers to build them. The materials are seconds, scavenged from contractors. There are 22,000 bricks stacked in the back yard. The monastery has been built by amateurs. The flaws show in the warped trusses, gaping joints and stones that fit like the wrong pieces in a puzzle. He started building the church 14 years ago, and wanted to finish it in time to celebrate midnight Mass this Christmas. Before Thanksgiving, he pushed the deadline back once again.

“It’s hard to get volunteers,” he said. “The faith is being lost today. No matter where you go, religious communities are falling apart. We live in a time of darkness and confusion. But we are not confused. We know the direction we must go.”

Natale, Brother Joseph to his followers, has been called a quack, a visionary, a rebel and a guardian of tradition. He preaches a vague mixture of anti-communism and Armageddon. He says the clergy has been infiltrated by communists and that the world will be destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. He has been crippled since childhood, and says that his handicap had driven him to be a leader.

Brother Joseph Natale, who like many monks is not an ordained priest, is sure that one day his massive construction project will be completed and his efforts vindicated. His complex, the Most Holy Family Monastery, stands on Cross Keys Road, in a rural section of Camden County not far from Berlin and the Gloucester County border. But the Roman Catholic Church has refused to recognize the monastery as a legitimate religious community.

Despite official Church opposition, Brother Natale, 54, has developed a following. He says he has 15,000 names on a mailing list. Every Sunday, 20 to 50 people attend Mass in the Shrine of St. Jude, a roadside chapel at the monastery. The worshippers come from South Jersey, Philadelphia, and beyond, some driving more than 150 miles. They want to hear the Latin Tridentine Mass performed by a retired priest

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in return for \$100 and a jug of California red wine. The Church banned this version of the Mass 20 years ago.

The Church considers Brother Natale a renegade and his monastery a fantasy. The Camden Diocese has refused to recognize him since 1967, when he bought his land and registered with the state as a non-profit corporation. Brother Joseph has even appealed his case to the Vatican, but has been rebuffed.

Critics say that Brother Natale is building an empty vessel, a grandiose ghost town for monks who will never materialize. They acknowledge that he has a magnetic, stubborn personality. But they say he has tried to do more than he is qualified to do.

“You know the Peter Principle,” said a man who occasionally goes to Mass in the Pine Hill chapel because he likes the Latin service. “I think Brother Joseph has reached his level of incompetence. Of course, I may be wrong. Someday I might eat my words.

Being a black sheep has been the secret of Brother Natale’s success as well as his failure. It has made him attractive to a small but worried group of people who attend Mass at the chapel. They are unhappy with the way the Church has changed to adapt to the modern world. They see him as the custodian of family values in a world torn apart by drugs, sex and violence.

Brother Natale has found a niche in a disorganized, largely informal movement within the Catholic Church. The movement opposes many of the changes made by the Second Vatican Council, which met between 1962 and 1965 to update doctrine and practices of the church. Some of the opposition leaders have been much better known than Brother Natale.

On one extreme is French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who was suspended by the Vatican in 1976 for disobeying church doctrine. His followers run a Seminary in Connecticut and hold illicit Mass at Swiss Pines near Valley Forge.

On the other extreme is Edward F. Heffernan, a layman who ran a storefront shrine and academy in Feasterville, Bucks County. Authorities closed the institution 2 years ago, after finding 1,000 pounds of dynamite and pipe bombs in a trailer near the shrine. Heffernan pleaded guilty to risking a public catastrophe. He was sentenced to 6 to 23 months in jail, and the court barred him from reopening his institution.

Brother Natale falls somewhere between those two extremes, according to the people who know him. He can’t begin to compare with Archbishop Lefebvre in background and prestige, yet they both appeal to traditionalist elements within the church. He doesn’t seem to exercise the cult-like influence over his followers that was attributed to Heffernan. But some of the people who attend Sunday Mass in the Shrine of St. Jude are refugees from Feasterville. Father Marian Palandrano, was an officer of the academy in Feasterville.

“The traditionalist movement has everything from frauds to nuts to legitimate people, and there are people who are all three,” said Ken Iandoli, who runs a mail-order business in used and rare Catholic

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books from his home in Clementon. “Like all movements, it attracts the fringe. What Heffernan did makes everybody else look bad.”

landoli has gone to Mass in Swiss Pines and Pine Hill. He separates the people who follow Lefebvre and those that follow Natale into two distinct categories. “Generally, the ones who come here are not the intellectual types,” he said of Pine Hill. Your lawyers and doctors go to Swiss Pines to hear the archbishop. These people are just average, devout Catholics.”

Brother Natale protests that his group is independent. “We don’t affiliate with any organization,” he said. “Satan plays both sides of the roads, not only liberals but also traditionalists.”

Joseph Natale was reared in an Irish-Italian neighborhood in South Philadelphia’s Santa Monica parish. When he was 4 years old, he contracted tuberculosis from, he said, contaminated cow’s milk. The disease attacked his hips and spine, forcing him in and out of hospitals for 17 years and leaving him unable to walk without crutches.

He enrolled in the White Memorial School for handicapped children on Broad Street, where he learned to make ceramics. At the age of 17 or 18, he began manufacturing porcelain slippers, dogs, praying hands, ashtrays and other curios in his basement. He sold them to Gimbels, Woolworth, Green’s Five & Dime – “all the big stores.”

In his mid-20s he started applying for admission into religious communities. Monasteries across the country rejected him, he said, because he was handicapped. He was about 30 before his luck changed. The last five places he wrote agreed to consider him. He chose St. Vincent’s Archabbey, a Benedictine community in Latrobe, PA.

Natale stayed at St Vincent’s for nearly four years, until he was ready to take his permanent vows. Instead of committing himself, however, he asked for a two-year leave of absence. He remembers what made him want to leave. “The abbot kept the brothers down in a way,” he said. “They were like shoe-shine boys.”

His goal was to establish his own monastery. The two years almost expired before he found the place he was looking for. “I had just about given up,” he said. “I was driving around the pike toward Somerdale when some crazy inner voice told me to turn around. I saw a sign for Atlantic Realty, and they showed me the house.

It was a vacant white frame house in Pine Hill, on eight acres of wooded land. In those days, it was in the middle of nowhere, and Cross Keys Road was covered with cinder. Since then, subdivisions have sprung up around the monastery, and the neighbors have started to complain about the chimes, which ring every hour from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Cross Keys Road has been paved, and it is heavily traveled connecting the route from the White Horse Pike to the Black Horse Pike.

Brother Natale called his religious order the Oblates of St. Jude, because St. Jude is the patron saint of hopeless cases. “We felt we were pretty hopeless in the beginning,” Brother Natale said. “Ever since then, we have carried the cross.”

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Originally, Brother Natale conceived the Most Holy Family Monastery as a community for crippled monks. He was angry at the monasteries that had rejected him, and he wanted to offer other handicapped people a chance to serve God. A series of candidates passed through the monastery. In 1975, the facility housed eight monks. Their mission was to build new buildings and to expand the community.

But some of the monks suffered from severe ailments such as cerebral palsy. “We took some in here who couldn’t even peel potatoes,” said Brother Natale. He realized that it was cruel to expect them to dig out a cellar and to lay bricks. He sent them home. Other men learned skills for the first time and left to find jobs.

“Once a man develops his trade and sees that he can do the work he thought he couldn’t do, he wants to go out into the world and sow his oats,” said Brother Natale.

He now presides over two monks, Thomas Wedekind, who has been with the monastery from the beginning, and John Vennari, a former rock musician. Brother Wedekind, 44, came from the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd, a religious community in Albuquerque, N.M., dedicated to caring for destitute men.

Brother Vennari, 27, came to the monastery five years ago for a week-long retreat. At the end of the retreat, he called his family in Philadelphia’s Tacony section and asked them to bring more clothes.

Brother Vennari wears his medieval black robe for Sunday Mass, but quickly changes after visitors leave. He puts on cement-spattered dungarees, work boots and a flannel shirt. He spends hours every day climbing scaffolds, working at the construction. He wears his hair in an ascetic-looking crewcut that emphasizes the red rash that flares on his face and neck. Dirt rims his fingernails.

Brother Vennari went to parochial schools and dropped out of community college. He left a band, Stitches, and sold his electric guitar to become a monk. He still keeps a gut-string guitar in his bedroom.

“I was singing songs like Eric Clapton’s ‘Cocaine’ and Donna Summer’s ‘If You Want My Body,’ and I just couldn’t do it anymore,” Brother Vennari said. “It was glorifying the Devil.”

He was 22 when he joined the monastery, and believes that he made the right decision. “When you want to complain, you spend about 90 seconds staring at the crucifix and then you don’t dare complain.”

Brother Natale confides that he would like to send Brother Vennari to a Seminary, to be ordained as a priest, but he is afraid his only protégé would never come back.

The Camden Diocese issued the strongest public statement in February 1969, in a “Dear Father” letter that it asked all parish priests to read after Sunday Mass. In the letter, the diocese said it has denied permission for Brother Natale to start a new religious community, to seek members or to collect funds.

But Brother Natale persisted. In February, he sent a letter to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican. The cardinal’s secretary wrote back. Because of the Church hierarchy, he said, Brother Natale had to go through the diocese first.

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“Any group of people can band together and seek recognition,” Rev. Roger McGrath, a spokesman for the diocese, said last week. “This group is not part of the Catholic Church. To my knowledge, individuals within the group previously have been. But they have separated themselves off.”

Father McGrath said Brother Natale had fallen away from the Church by disobeying certain doctrines, such as the prohibition against performing the Latin Tridentine Mass, a 16th-century formulation of the liturgy. The Church has banned it since Vatican II, although Pope John Paul II recently decreed it could be celebrated with the permission of the bishop under certain circumstances.

If celebrated by a properly ordained priest, the old Mass is “valid but illicit”, said Father McGrath.

He said it is unlikely that the Church would punish the monastery. “Since this group is not affiliated with the Church, the Church has no control over them; so it would exercise no penalties against them,” said Father McGrath.

Father Palandrano, the retired priest who serves the Shrine of St. Jude, scoffs at the idea of punishment. “They can all take a walk,” he said. “I am fed up with the goofy bishops and everybody else, including the Pope himself.” Just after celebrating the Mass, he changes into his sporting clothes. He wears a tweed hat, steel-rimmed glasses and wind breaker. He carries a jug of red wine, part of his payment. He says he will use it for the private Mass he holds each morning at home.

The 62-year-old priest, who lives in Philadelphia, was ordained in 1942. He explains why he has refused to perform the new Mass, even to try it out. “Antiques have the best value,” he said. “I love the Mass. I went into the seminary in the fourth grade. The study and the priesthood was my whole life’s work. That’s why I hold on to it.”

Father Palandrano lent his name to the Marian Foundation, the corporate name of the shrine in Feasterville. He also celebrates the Mass in Feasterville. The Pennsylvania attorney general sued him and three other officers of the foundation last year to prevent them from continuing to solicit money after the shrine had been closed. The officers signed a consent decree, agreeing to dismantle the foundation.

Before they discovered the chapel of St. Jude, Eileen Myers and her husband joined with others to celebrate the Latin Tridentine Mass in a motel room. Now they drive to the chapel from Medford. She has six children and 23 grandchildren. She pickets abortion clinics and belongs to Eagle Forum, the organization founded by anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly. She laments that the country is “in a moral decline,” that public schools have stolen the minds of children from their parents and that the Church has grown weak.

“We have become very unhappy with changes in the Church,” Myers said. “I was taught to obey, unless you feel your faith is being undermined.”

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Some of the worshipers go to Brother Natale for counseling. He sits at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and watching an old woman wipe her eyes with her handkerchief. Later, he retires to his office, where he tells a visitor that the Church is being undermined.

“Satan has entered the churches.⁴ Schism is widespread. We must preserve the Church regardless of the cost,” Brother Natale said. “We know that the communists are infiltrating the clergy. It’s a fact; we got it from KYW. But we need permission to use what we heard on the radio.”

He pushes a child’s six-grade textbook across the desk. It is a book of religious instruction, titled ‘Christ Is With Us’. It is turned to a page that, in ornate script, quotes Pope Paul VI in a message of peace to the United Nations. Colored dots fill the open spaces in the letters P, R, D and O. The dots are part of the calligraphy.

“Put this over it. What do you see?” he asked. He extended a paper napkin with a line traced on it in ball-point ink. The line connected the dots in the letters of the Pope’s message. Very crudely, but unmistakably, the blue line traced the shape of a hammer and sickle.

He grinned, like a man who had just demonstrated a clever card trick. The book proved his point. Case closed.