

“Easing Plight of Handicaps is his Religion” - By Joe Sharkey
The Philadelphia Inquirer (Metropolitan) - Thursday July 25, 1974
Article on Joseph Natale



Note: The following 1974 newspaper article written by **Joe Sharkey** of "**The Philadelphia Inquirer**" is presented to provide further proof that **Joseph Natale** (1927-1995), the founder of the Most Holy Family Monastery, knew full well that he needed to obtain **canonical approval** from the Church authorities to legitimately establish his religious order and that, at the time this article was written, he was determined to obtain it.

Berlin, N.J. – When Joseph Natale was a boy growing up in the crowded streets around Broad and Ritner in South Philadelphia, he always wanted to be a priest.

The trouble, he explains now, was that at the age of 4 he developed tuberculosis of the spine and hips that eventually left him crippled for life.

Being a priest, he says, was out. Instead, after running a ceramics business for 12 years, he began religious training with the Benedictine monks and searched for a religious order that would welcome all handicap persons.

He did not find one, so he started his own.

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Six and a half years ago, Joseph Natale left the Benedictine study and founded the Oblates of St. Jude, a religious order named after the patron saint of lost causes and dedicated to the proposition that clergymen who are handicapped can contribute as much as those who are not.

“In the (Catholic) Church, there was no religious community for handicap men like myself. So I started one.”

As he spoke these words recently he was slapping mortar onto a brick outside the religious shrine and training facility that he and three other members of his order are building near here.

Natale is now Brother Joseph, a soft-spoken man of 43 with an easy sense of humor and an almost fierce sense of determination to prove that his handicap cannot stand in the way of a full life as a monk.

At a time when religious orders are experiencing serious problems attracting recruits, Brother Joseph said he has found it difficult to have his new order taken serious by the Church.

But the order has attracted followers. Besides the four handicapped brothers – who wear clerical garb and follow strict Benedictine rules when not working – there is a growing following of lay members, people who contribute time and about \$3,100 a year towards the order’s major goal, Brother Joseph says.

That goal is the completion of the shrine, training school and adjacent recreation and service buildings. They are being built on the eight-acre tract the order owns amid the shrinking farm fields just west of here.

Brother Joseph, who is able to walk with crutches, has laid most of the bricks. The others have done heavy hauling and carpentry. Much of the construction material has been contributed by contractors or bought at low prices.

“You just keep going until you’re done,” Brother Joseph said. “It’s been nothing but toil for six years – and we have to do everything the hard way.”

The ultimate objective is to establish an institution run by handicapped people who have been trained as craftsmen, Brother Joseph said. Then he and the others will concentrate on the religious life of their order, to which they hope to attract more members as “we get operational.”

The order has been incorporated as a non-profit organization for the handicapped, but there has been no official action by the Catholic Church to recognize it as a religious order. Brother Joseph hopes to change this.

“We’re just tolerated by the Camden Diocese,” he said. “But the more they say no to me, the more determined I get. I’m going to get the canonical approval for the order if I have to go to Rome and sleep on the steps of St. Peter’s.”

Charles J. Germaine, a spokesman for the Camden Diocese, confirmed that Brother Joseph’s order had asked for official recognition, but he said that the Church approaches such matters warily.

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“Otherwise, new orders would be popping up and dropping out all over the place,” he said. “The orders that have been around for hundreds of years are having serious financial and recruiting problems these days. Unless there is a proven potential for stability, I imagine they (church officials) would be a little leery of sanctioning a new order.”

Germaine added: “Most (existing) religious orders do take handicapped people, depending on the extent of the handicaps.”

“What’s happening here is unbelievable,” said Mrs. Kathy DiStefano, a volunteer from Hi-Nella, N.J., who was canning peaches in the monastery’s kitchen Tuesday morning. She is a member of the order’s lay auxiliary.

“Maybe this is what religion should be all about,” she said.

Another member of the order is Brother Joseph, 32, an affable former New Yorker who joined the order six years ago because it offered him something as a handicapped person that other orders did not.

“I can’t lay a brick straight, but I’m good at doing the mixing. (of the mortar),” he said.

Brother Joseph, meanwhile, discussed his plans from inside the uncompleted shrine, a brick church inside which six pigeons fluttered freely towards the dome, their wings catching pastel light from the donated stained-glass windows.

“I think high and shoot for the moon,” he said of the buildings. “Something starts at 10 feet and before you know it, it’s 30 feet.”

Why?

“Determination,” he said. “I feel I represent the handicapped person. Being handicapped all my life; I know it’s not just schooling you need, not just training. It’s learning to accept your affliction; that’s what it is.

“I feel that if I fail, they fail.”