

The Smoke of Satan:

Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism

By Michael W. Cuneo - 1999

(extract from Chapter 4)

Catholic Separatists

It was almost midnight at the **Holy Family Monastery in Berlin, New Jersey**, but Fr. Nicholas Gruner was just hitting his stride. Slight and bespectacled, with just with just a hint of paunch under his ankle-length soutane, Gruner stood on a makeshift stage in the monastery's main hall and addressed his audience in lisping monotone.

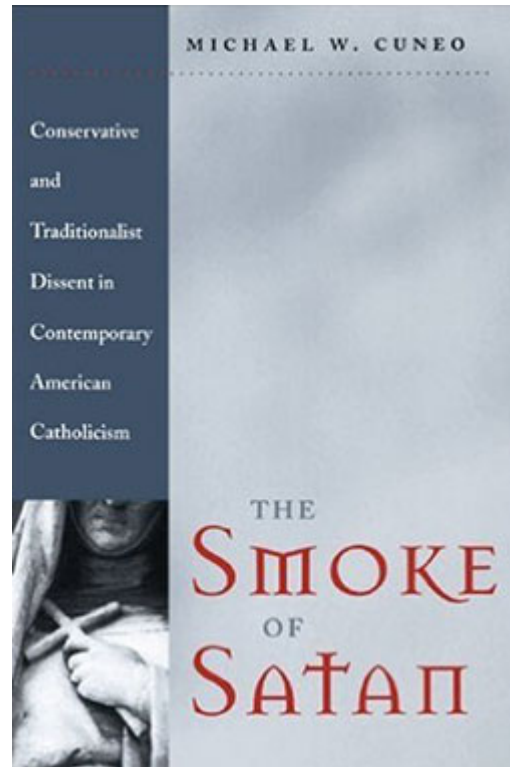
It was both his right and his responsibility to challenge the pope and the Vatican, Gruner said. No less in authority than the eminent sixteenth century theologian St. Robert Bellarmine taught that Catholics were entitled to use force against a pope or anyone who threatened their faith. And the current pope, Gruner argued, by virtue of his infidelity to the Virgin Mary and her Fatima messages, has put the faith of countless millions at risk. Indeed, Gruner continued, the Third Secret of Fatima warned that the Vatican would be overrun by communists, and this, in fact, is exactly the situation that exists today.

Several people in the audience gasped at the revelation, and about a dozen others nodded knowingly. But Gruner still had more conspiracy left to spin.

It wasn't surprising, he said, that the current pope was suppressing the Third Secret of Fatima and its warnings of a communist takeover of the Church. More than thirty years ago, Pope John XXIII signed a blasphemous accord with Moscow, and ever since the Vatican has been strictly prohibited from speaking out against atheistic communism. Moreover, the Vatican-Moscow accord has been a critical factor behind John Paul II's failure to fulfill the Virgin Mary's most important request. During her miraculous appearances at Fatima seventy-five years ago, Gruner said, the Virgin promised that a great reign of peace would be gibe the world if the Holy Father, in synchrony with every single bishop of the Church, publically consecrated Russia to her immaculate heart. Regardless of what powerful deceivers within the Church have tried to claim, Gruner said, this consecration has yet to take place according to the exact formula requested by the Virgin, and if it didn't take place soon, the entire world faces a terrible, unthinkable, chastisement. What's more, Gruner went on, St John Bosco once prophesied the day that would come when the entire Church would be overcome with heresy, and also that a great cataclysm would strike the world during a month that has two moons. And March 1999 has two moons!

At this point, about twenty-five people in the audience gasped audibly, and four or five stood up and left the hall. Gruner decided to finish with a flourish.

Don't be fooled! He said. Communism still exists in Russia and elsewhere. A leopard doesn't simply change is spots overnight. Communism is alive and well, and more insidious than ever. And remember, Catholics have the right and obligation to defend their faith – with force if necessary. The faith is being undermined from within today- this is what the Third Secret of Fatima is all about – and loyal Catholics must rise to the occasion. Remember that Jesus once told Peter, "Get thee behind me Satan!" This tells Catholics that they should be loyal to the pope only as long as the pope remains loyal to God and Mary.



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Fr. Gruner stepped down from the stage with a resounding applause, and within seconds he was engulfed by dozens of people looking for further news on the approaching chastisement. I slipped out of the main hall and introduced myself to a sixtyish woman named Mary who was standing behind a table stacked with back issues of Gruner's quarterly magazine, *the Fatima Crusader*. Mary had worked closely with Gruner for several years at his headquarters in Fort Erie, Ontario, and she was obviously star-struck.

"Did you know that when Fr. Gruner was born his grandfather told the family that Fr. Gruner would be a prophet? And by saying this, the grandfather has also been proven to be a prophet.

I steered the conversation to the subject of E. Michael Jones, who has published a several scathing articles about Gruner and his *Fatima* ministry in *Fidelity*.

"Fr. Gruner has filed suit against E. Michael Jones and his scummy magazine for defamation of character," Mary told me. "Jones is a worm! And he's one of THEM."

"One of them?"

"He's a Jew-Boy."

"Jones?"

"Well, you know they change their names. He's a Marrano."

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The Holy Family Monastery, a rambling brick complex located on about ten acres of land in southeastern New Jersey, was built in the late sixties by a breakaway Benedictine monk named Brother Joseph Natale. For the past several years the monastery has hosted three-day conferences in early May on matters of interest to what may broadly be described as the extreme Catholic right. In addition to Fr. Gruner, the May 1994 conference featured as a guest speakers Prince Henri de Bourbon-Parmé, who claims to be a descendent of Louis XIV and Philip V; Gary Potter, a longtime contributor to such right-wing publications as the *Remnant* and *Triumph* magazine; Suzanne Rini, a journalist who has written extensively of fetal experimentation; and David Allen White, a professor of literature at the Annapolis Naval Academy and author of the book on the right-wing Brazilian prelate Antonio de Castro Mayer.

Altogether, about three hundred adults were in attendance in the 1994 conference, and almost as many children and teenagers. Some people had driven to New Jersey from as far away as Cleveland and Chicago, the monastery's parking lot was jam-packed with campers and trailers. For the most part, conference attendees were white and of working or lower-middle-class social standing. Roughly one-third of the adults were over sixty years of age, and a sizable contingent looked to be in their mid to late twenties. Over all, they were a scrubbed-down and clean-cut crew, and could have easily passed as participants in a 1950's Church picnic.

The morning after Gruner's talk, I checked into a lecture by a certain Brother John (Vennari), who was one of the monastery's resident monks. In his mid-thirties, brown-robed, and balding, Brother John had a long angular face with bulging eyes that seemed to grow larger for emphasis when he spoke.

Brother John's topic was the French Revolution, which he denounced (eye bulgingly) as the most heinous event of the past three hundred years. It was the Freemasons, he said, in their quest for world domination, who plotted the Revolution of 1789, and nothing has ever quite been the same since. The

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Revolution dismantled the sacred order of Christendom, it forced the Church to its knees, and it paved the way for such modern day scourges as liberalism, secularism, and homosexuality.

Br Fr. Gruner's standards, this was pretty tame stuff, and the crowd began fidgeting. A middle aged monk sitting across from me started to snore. Brother John picked up the pace.

The shame of it all, he said, is that the French Revolution could have been prevented. If the French monarchy had consecrated their country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, they would have been spared the revolution, and Christendom would have been preserved. Now it's up to us, he said, to dedicate ourselves to the Sacred Heart and build a new Christendom - a new Catholic kingdom. This can be done! We can defeat the evil that is surrounding us, but only through the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Sacred Heart is preeminent devotion of our time: it is our hope and our salvation.

Brother John's closing shots won generous applause, but Fr. Gruner sat at the back of the hall with several of his supporters, arms folded and grumbling. After several minutes I approached a blond-haired man named Tom, who was a part of Gruner's retinue, and asked what he thought of Brother John's lecture. "It was pretty naïve, don't you think?" he said. "Sure, the Sacred Heart devotion is important, but the only thing that can save us now is the secret of Fatima messages. Should he not know that by now?"

Breaking away from Tom, I managed to track down Brother John in a nearby hallway, and I asked for his assessment of conservative Catholics such as James Hitchcock and E. Michael Jones. "As far as I'm concerned, all of those people are completely off base," he said. "They're guilty of papolatry, a false worship of the pope. They have ridiculous reverence for John Paul II, and they've been waiting for him to save the Church. If John Paul II really is a legitimate pope, he's also an unbelievably weak one. He's been contaminated by secularism and Freemasonry. And the *Wanderer* crowd doesn't think we should be criticizing him."

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Later that same day, after sitting through several more lectures, I had dinner at a local diner with a burly, baby-faced man in his late thirties whom I'll call Mark. Mark (who asked that I conceal his real identity) is married, with four children, and works as a sales representative for a medium-sized firm in the mid-west. For the past ten years or so, he's been a leading proponent of one of the Catholic right's most intriguing conspiracy theories.

"I was raised in a very devout Catholic home," Mark told me, "but after the Second Vatican Council I became very confused and very disturbed. As I saw it, the council had brought a completely new religion into being. The new post-Vatican II church, with its liberal theologies, its ecumenism, its secular liturgies, and its ethical pluralism wasn't the Catholic Church any longer. It was a new heretical creation. After graduating from college, I started attending a traditional Catholic chapel that had been founded by Fr. Francis Fenton of ORCM (the Orthodox Roman Catholic Movement). I meet my wife at the chapel, and by 1974 I was attending the Tridentine Mass exclusively. And in the meantime, I was desperately trying to figure out what had gone wrong. How did it happen that Pope Paul VI signed the council's document on religious liberty, which directly contradicted Pope Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors. And how did it happen that Paul VI tossed out the Tridentine Mass and replaced it with a Mass that is obviously blasphemous? I wound up coming to the conclusion that Paul VI and John XXIII, who had called the council in the first

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place, weren't true popes. They were anti-popes, agents of destruction, who had been planted in the Vatican. But this was only part of the puzzle. In 1988 I came in contact with a traditionalist Catholic names Gary Giuffre, and he told me he had some evidence that the real pope was a man called Cardinal Joseph Siri, and that Cardinal was being held prisoner in a monastery in Rome. And ever since then, Giuffre and myself and a number of other people have been piecing together more and more of the puzzle. At this point in time, we believe we have a sustainable theory as to what has gone wrong with the Church."

The Cardinal-Siri-as-real-pope-in-exile theory, which Mark laid out for me runs something like this.

After the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958, one of the leading contenders for the papal crown was Giuseppe Siri, a stiff necked conservative from Genoa. Indeed when white smoke started billowing out of the papal conclave at the Vatican on October 26, 1958, many people assumed that Siri had won the job. The white smoke was a traditional signal that the College of Cardinals had elected a new pope, and the Swiss Guards were dispatched to the conclave to greet him. But then something went wrong. After half an hour or so, the white smoke turned black, and the Swiss Guards were sent back to their quarters. The priest who had been announcing on Vatican Radio that a new pope was elected telephoned into the conclave and was told that the white smoke had been a mistake. Two days later on October 28, Angelo Roncalli (John XXIII) was proclaimed pope, despite heavy rumors that he had been inducted into the Freemasons while serving as apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece in 1934. When Roncalli himself died, on June 3, 1963, another conclave was convoked, and the scenario that unfolded was eerily familiar. Once again Cardinal Siri opened as a strong favorite, once again white smoke emerged from the conclave only to turn black, and once again Siri was left out in the cold as Giovanni Battista Montini (Paul VI) was proclaimed pope.

It's at this point that the "Siri Theory" really heats up. The white smoke that originally appeared at both the 1958 and 1963 conclaves, Mark told me, wasn't a mistake. In both cases the smoked signaled the election of a new pope, and in both cases the pope was Cardinal Siri. But in both cases as well, Siri was forced to relinquish the papacy when secret messages that were somehow smuggled into the conclave warned that the Vatican would suffer some horrible punishment (possibly even nuclear bombardment) unless someone else was made pope. At the 1963 conclave, according to the testimony of a certain Paul Scortesco, who was professedly a cousin of one of the Swiss Guards charged with guarding the proceedings, the secret warnings were delivered by means of a dumbwaiter and handed directly to Siri upon his election. Moreover, the organization that Scortesco claimed was responsible for the writings were B'nai B'rith; which was operating on behalf of a worldwide Judeo-Masonic conspiracy in an effort to dismantle traditional Catholicism. The Judeo-Masonic conspirators were determined to install their own agents on the papal throne, and Roncalli and Montini were precisely the men they wanted. Cardinal Siri, for his part, was sent to live in exile in a monastery in Rome after the 1963 conclave, where he remained incommunicado until his death in 1989. But not entirely incommunicado. Over the years, a number of people reported meeting secretly with Siri and asking about the true story behind the conclaves. His response was almost always the same: "I cannot speak with you about it. I am bound by secret." Finally during a meeting with a Vietnamese priest named Father Khoat in 1988, Siri apparently broke down and admitted that he was in fact the true pope. When Khoat offered to take him away from the monastery to America, however, Siri refused, saying "I cannot leave here with you; they can kill me at any time."

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As mind-numbingly bizarre as the Siri theory might sound to the outsider, it offers Catholics like Mark a closed circle of explanation for the enormous changes that have taken place in the Church over the past thirty-five years. The Second Vatican Council, the vernacular liturgy, the ecumenical movement, the new theology; all of this has come to pass under the watch of false popes bent on destroying the Church while the real pope has been kept in exile. Moreover, conspiracy theories of this sort (and there are currently about half a dozen different ones making the rounds of the catholic right) give their votaries the deep satisfaction of having the inside scoop, the real behind-the-scenes-story, while the rest of the world grasps at appearances. James Hitchcock and E. Michael Jones and the *Wanderer* might think that they know what is going on with the Church, but we know otherwise. Whereas others, out of fear or misplaced piety, seem content merely with scratching the surface, we get bravely to the bottom of events for their true meanings and hidden purposes.

The conspiracy culture of the extreme Catholic right seems governed, in fact, by a perverse economy of scale: the more outlandish or fantastic the theory, the more it defies common sense, the greater the prestige it seems to carry. (While the entire world assumes that communism has fallen on hard times, in reality it has never been stronger. And while almost everyone under the sun looks up to John XXIII and Paul VI as authentic popes, nothing could be further from the truth.) All of this, of course, is partly an exercise in titillation, and the conspiracy-spinning people like Mark and Fr. Gruner sometimes seems like a parlor game for severely disaffected Catholics, a sort of intellectual recreation for the religious forlorn. When standing outside of ordinary historical time, after all, one needs some way to occupy the mind.

Mark insisted that we take time out to play Faith Hill's cover version of the Janis Joplin song "Piece of My Heart" on the finer jukebox, and then we headed back to the monastery for a late-night meeting with Fr. Gruner. After Mark and Gruner swapped conspiracy tales, the talk turned conservative Catholic such as E. Michael Jones and James Hitchcock. Mark argued that leading conservatives were engaged, in some cases inadvertently, in a cover-up of what was really happening in the Church. Gruner told me that publications such as the *Wanderer* and the *Fidelity* magazines and organizations like the CUF were secretly funded by the Vatican in an effort to subvert the *Fatima* prophecies. He also told me that E. Michael Jones was merely masquerading as a Catholic.

"You know, of course, that Jones is secretly a Jew. He's a Marrano, planted in the American Church to confuse Catholics and sow hatred against people like myself. I think most of us have figured that out by now."

The Separatists (or Traditionalist) Option

The Most Holy Family Monastery is just one of three hundred centers of traditionalist (or separatist) Catholicism currently in operation across the United States. The monastery was founded in 1967 by a self-proclaimed Benedictine monk named **Brother Joseph Natale** as a community for handicapped men, but it rapidly evolved instead into a beachhead for right-wing extremism. Throughout the late sixties and seventies, Brother Joseph fervently denounced both the Second Vatican Council and the new Mass, and by the mid-seventies his community had broken off entirely from the institutional church to become probably the first independent traditionalist monastery in America. Over the years, a number of church officials, including the current bishop of the Camden, New Jersey, diocese, James T. McHugh, have attempted to discuss the possibility of working out some sort of rapprochement, but Brother Joseph has

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consistently refused to answer their calls. In the mid-eighties, there were a total of ten monks in residence at the monastery, but since then the number has shrunk to just three. (The most recent defection occurred shortly after the May 1994 conference, when Brother John [Vennari], the aforementioned Sacred Heart lecturer, fled to Fort Erie to work for Fr. Gruner.) In addition to its annual conference, the monastery sponsors monthly retreats and a Tridentine Mass on Sundays that draws between two and three hundred people.

Several months after the conference, I visited the monastery again, this time to meet personally with Brother Joseph. Upon arriving I was ushered into a paneled waiting room by a rotund monk in his mid-fifties who identified himself as Brother Thomas. On one wall there were framed photographs of Popes John I and John Paul II, and on the other there was a larger photograph of Brother Joseph and Brother Thomas, both beaming and wearing suits, with a beaming Jimmy Durante standing between them. After finishing his lunch Brother Joseph came into the room on crutches, greeted me warmly, and took a seat behind a large wooden desk.

He told me that he had been **born into a working-class family in Philadelphia in 1933**, but **contracted tuberculosis of the bone at age four** and had been forced to spend most of the next seventeen years shuttling in and out of hospitals. After a stint in the private import business, he entered the Benedictine Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1960 as a lay postulate, but left less than a year later to lay the groundwork for the Holy Family Monastery. (I was later informed by the archivist of the Saint Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe that brother Joseph left before taking his final vows and thus never became a Benedictine monk.)

Brother Joseph suggested to me that he had been infused as a young man with the gift of prophecy (“a special, mysterious and divine knowledge”, is how he referred to it), and it was this that had afforded him special insight on to the travails of contemporary Catholicism. “I know it is hard for you to understand, so I’ll just give you a couple of illustrations,” he said. “Even before Vatican II was finished, I knew, and knew absolutely, that it was part of a communist conspiracy to destroy the Church. The Bishops at the council wanted democratize Catholicism, they wanted an egalitarian theology, and most of them were secret communists and Masons. They knew exactly what they were doing. My community here was the first one in the United States to see the council for what it really was, and we rejected it completely.” Brother Joseph’s second illustration of his prophetic powers concerned Pope John I, who was found dead in his quarters of an apparent heart attack on September 28, 1978, just one month after his election to the papacy. “Regardless of what you have been told,” he said, “John Paul I did not die of natural causes. He was murdered. Shortly after his election I went into a kind of trance and was told that John Paul I would be murdered because he wanted to return the Church to its traditions. He was murdered by his own. The communist infiltrators in the Vatican and the College of Cardinals, working together with the Masons, killed John Paul I. At the same time I had a vision of John Paul II, and was told he’d be the next pope and also that he’d be an authentic pope, even though most of his actions would be controlled by communist advisers and manipulators in the Vatican.”

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His prophetic credentials now established, Brother Joseph next showed me a grade-six catechism, “Christ with Us”, published in 1967 by Willian Sadlier, Inc. On the first page was an excerpt of a prayer delivered by Pope Paul VI to the United Nations that the publisher had decorated with what seemed to be a random sprinkling of brown dots. With a sheet of tracing paper Brother Joseph connected the dots, in the process, produced an image that crudely resembled a hammer and sickle.

“Do you see what this is?” he asked, triumphantly. “It’s the emblem of communism, and it was secretly put on these catechisms for Catholic school children. Do you see the point? The Second Vatican Council was an ingenious plot designed by communists to take over the Church, and after the council was finished, communism infected every aspect of the Church. Communism isn’t dead; it’s stronger than ever. The United States is next, and then the entire world!”

At this point we were briefly interrupted when Brother Thomas entered the room and asked permission to go into town and get a haircut. Brother Joseph handed him a ten-dollar bill and reminded him to bring back the change.

I asked Brother Joseph where the operating funds for the monastery came from. “Almost all our money comes from private donations, which almost never exceeds \$100,” he said, “and the rest comes from the sales of our books and videos.” (The monastery operates a small gift shop that is heavily stocked with “traditionalist” Catholic literature.) “We have a mailing list of one hundred thousand homes across the country, and we send our begging letters to every one of them. We also send our newsletter, *Cry in the Wilderness*, to traditional Catholics in twenty countries, and it brings us some donations. But we don’t have any big financial backers. In twenty-eight years, the biggest donation we’ve ever received was \$10,000, and that was only once.”

As I prepared to leave, Brother Joseph broke into an apocalyptic tirade that was clearly intended to prolong our conversation. “Five years is about all the time the world has left,” he declared. “Canada and the United States today are completely atheistic. Doomsday is on the way! What’s the United Nations? It’s a communistic house of subversion designed to bring about a one world government. What’s gun control? It’s an effort to disarm the American people so they won’t be able to resist a communist takeover. Why isn’t Bill Clinton impeached? He’s totally immoral; his wife’s a homosexual. Who puts drugs on our streets? Who? Government agents, that’s who. Doping the people makes them helpless.”