

BLOGS

‘They are profiting from the closure of the monastery’: Rome suppresses Carmel in Philadelphia

Sources say Rome and the local archdiocese did all they could to discourage a revival of the monastery – and that they are the ones who will receive the monastery's estimated assets of approximately \$10 million.



Mass at the Carmelite Monastery of Philadelphia

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([LifeSiteNews](#)) – Troubling news is coming to us from Philadelphia. Already in February, unbeknown to the general public, the Congregation for Religious Institutes under Cardinal João Braz de Aviz suppressed the historic 120-year-old Carmel in Philadelphia that was the cradle of the devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux in this country. Sources told LifeSiteNews that it appears Rome and the local archdiocese did all they could to discourage a revival of the monastery and that they are the ones who will receive much of the monastery's estimated assets of approximately \$10 million.

LifeSite [reported](#) on this Carmel last year, when Rome sent a delegation both to the Philadelphia Carmel as well as to the [traditional Carmelite nuns in Fairfield, Pennsylvania](#). In 2017, this traditional order of nuns with its [motherhouse in Valpareiso, Nebraska](#) sent several nuns to Philadelphia, with the support of then-Archbishop Charles Chaput, in order to revive the Carmel in Philadelphia, which lacked vocations for many years. Sources close to the situation told LifeSite that Archbishop Chaput tried everything he could to preserve this monastery with its long and crucial history.

However, after Chaput went into retirement in January 2020 – Pope Francis hastily accepted his offer to retire as soon as he turned 75 years old – it was not long before the traditional nuns left Philadelphia again. As different sources told LifeSite, the archdiocese seemed to discourage their traditional and stricter charism. In April 2021, the nuns had to leave Philadelphia because they saw that they could not live their traditional Carmelite charism under the conditions there, especially since under new Vatican rules (as laid out in the 2018 Instruction *Cor Orans*) they had to be under the influence of Saint Joseph's Association of Carmelite Monasteries, which was threatening their charism.

In a letter to their benefactors, the Carmelites of Fairfield explained the situation on June 19, 2021, and here we quote at length:

In July 2017, the Valparaiso Carmel was invited by the small and aging Philadelphia Carmel to help rejuvenate their community. Leaving their beloved Mothers and Sisters and the quiet setting of their monastic homes behind, three of our Nuns from Elysburg and six from Valparaiso undertook this task. Along with the one member of the original Philadelphia community, to whom they became quite close and from whom they received an enthusiastic welcome, these nine Nuns worked together to build a flourishing house of the Lord.

However, there was a looming cloud that threatened what we all thought would be a peaceful and fruitful future. For many years, the Philadelphia Carmel had been part of an association. When our Nuns arrived, it was assumed that withdrawing from this association would be a small matter. After all, the Nuns had been invited by the community and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia with the clear understanding that they were part of a young, thriving, dedicated Order who loved the Extraordinary Form of the Holy Mass and the time-honored traditions of the Discalced Carmelites. As attempts were being made to not only interfere with but to obstruct their way of life, the Nuns tried one way after another to gracefully bow out of this pre-existing commitment. When it became painfully clear that the freedom to maintain their identity as originally promised by the Archdiocese was not being honored, the only option left to the Nuns was to return to the monastery in Valparaiso, Nebraska. They did this in the most correct way possible, fulfilling all canonical requirements.

Contrary to rumors, April 9th unfolded very quietly at the Carmel in Philadelphia. The Nuns, with smiles and a few tears, took their leave of the original Nun (who wished to remain) and peacefully departed.

That is to say, a thriving order of nuns that has many vocations due to its traditional charism has been discouraged from helping the Carmel in Philadelphia to stay alive and well.

LifeSite reported last year that these nuns received an Apostolic Visitation in the wake of their leaving the Philadelphia Carmel. During that visitation, the official visitors were overheard as plotting to force the Novus Ordo Mass into the Carmel instead of the traditional liturgy.

Father Maximilian Dean, then-chaplain of the Fairfield nuns – who also warned that the Vatican plans to destroy these traditional monasteries – wrote in a commentary: “The Co-Visitors actually sent spies; they discussed the need to stop me from bringing the Sacraments and to switch the [Fairfield] Nuns over to the Novus Ordo Mass; they discussed strategies for turning the benefactors away from these traditional communities.”

As one source pointed out to LifeSite, these visitors of both the Fairfield monastery and the Philadelphia Carmel – the ones from Rome, as well as Sister Gabriela Hicks (who later wrote here her account of what happened at the Carmel in Philadelphia) and Sister Mary Elizabeth from the St. Joseph Association – “stand to profit financially from the suppression of the Carmel in Philadelphia.”

‘Elder abuse’ and a calculated maneuver?

There is a war against Tradition in the Church. The group working under Cardinal Braz de Aviz, as some sources tell LifeSite, is using the instructions for a reformed way of life for female monasteries around the world to destroy flourishing monasteries and, if possible, to receive the assets of those closed monasteries.

In the case of Mother Pia, the last remaining nun of the Philadelphia Carmel, LifeSite learned that she was waiting for quite some time, since the Apostolic Visitation of the monastery in September 2021, to receive the letter of suppression of the monastery so that she could go to her retirement place in Lake Elmo, Minnesota and at the same time would preserve the power to decide what to do with her monastery in Philadelphia. Yet, that letter did not arrive, and so with assurances from Rome that she was abiding by the rules (especially *Cor Orans* 72), she left the Carmel. However, afterward, Rome said that she had abandoned her monastery, which would mean that much of the assets of the monastery would now belong to the authorities (*Cor Orans* 73). Those assets total about \$10 million (which includes the real estate), sources say.

One source close to the situation, speaking to LifeSite anonymously, called the treatment of Mother Pia “elder abuse.”

Needless to say, as soon as Mother Pia had left the monastery, the letter of suppression of the monastery did arrive from Rome. Was it a calculated maneuver?

The local Catholics of Philadelphia – whose relatives had populated the monastery as nuns, who had donated much money over the 120 years of the monastery’s existence – were not even informed when Rome closed down the monastery. They were not informed that Sister Mary Elizabeth of the Trinity, of the Carmel in Loretto, Pennsylvania – who is the President of St. Joseph’s Association – is now in charge of the dissolution of the Carmel in Philadelphia.

As she wrote in a letter to her fellow Carmelite religious, dated October 21, 2022, and obtained by LifeSite: “The Holy See suppressed the Philadelphia Carmel in February of this year and, according to their decision, gave our Association the task of seeing to the dissolution of its civil corporation and the other matters which a suppression involves. It has been a truly heavy task for me, as you can imagine, one compounded by difficulties that have been, at times, out of my control.”

‘Catholics of Philadelphia, wake up!’

LifeSite was able to confirm with other sources that the monastery indeed was suppressed in February.

Furthermore, Sister Mary Elizabeth blamed in her letter the traditional nuns of Valparaiso for the calamitous events in Philadelphia when she wrote: “I believe that you are all probably aware of the unfortunate events surrounding the abrupt departure of the group of nuns that came to the Philadelphia Carmel in summer, 2017 from the Valparaiso and Fairfield Carmels and the calamitous effect this has had on one of the oldest monasteries in the US, a charter member of our Association and a monastery in which I myself had the privilege of living in the late 1990s.”

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has not been supportive of Mother Pia and her attempt at preserving the monastery. Sources told LifeSite that Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, the auxiliary of Philadelphia, did not allow Mother Pia to welcome new Carmelite nuns from other Carmels who were willing to move to Philadelphia and thereby to preserve that old Carmel. As LifeSite was also told, Fitzgerald even refused to meet with Mother Pia in person for a while, meeting with her only shortly before her departure. Another source told LifeSite that, not long after the traditional Carmelite nuns had left in April 2021, the sisters of the Association of St. Joseph and Bishop Fitzgerald “bullied Mother Pia to leave the monastery.”

One local Catholic layman said to LifeSite: “Catholics of Philadelphia, wake up!” He is hoping that the local Catholic community will now stand up and make sure that the Carmel in Philadelphia is preserved for a future revival of that “birthplace of devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux” in America.

The Carmel of St. Joseph and St. Anne, founded five years after St. Therese’s death in 1897, has had a close connection with the “Little Flower” from its beginning. Its website states that one of the founding sisters, Sister Stanislaus of the Blessed Sacrament, was the “the pioneer in establishing devotion to St. Therese in the United States”:

Her assignment as portress gave her the opportunity to share Therese with many others. Until Sister Stanislaus died in 1911, aged only 31, she corresponded with Mother Agnes of Jesus, Therese’s sister Pauline. The letters from Mother Agnes are posted on this site. As a result of this correspondence, the Carmelite Monastery in Philadelphia became the “depot” for thousands of booklets, pictures, and articles promoting devotion to St. Thérèse [as well as relics].

The monastery also has custody of first-class relics of St. Therese and her parents, Saints Zelig and Louis Martin, which are on loan from the Magnificat Foundation.

‘Cor Orans created a death panel for monasteries to streamline their closure’

The suspicion still stands that those authorities in the Church who are responsible for the suppression of the monastery – and the discouragement of its preservation – are the ones profiting financially from it. It might be worthwhile taking in the findings of Mary Cuff, who described her observations in her [article](#) “Pillaging the Monasteries: The Vatican’s Hidden Financial Scandal”:

In 2018, Carballo [Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, Cardinal Braz de Aviz’ collaborator at the Congregation for Religious Institutes] created *Cor Orans*, a new set of rules for female contemplative orders. Among other things, *Cor Orans* created a death panel for monasteries to streamline their closure. In his regulations, these forcibly shuttered monasteries’ assets can be claimed by a bureaucratic monastic federation, the diocese, and the Vatican (regulations 72 and 73). Since 2018, the number of monasteries forced to close has reached levels described by Sister Maria Johanna Lauterbach, OCist., as an [extinction](#).

Carballo has taken an active role in shuttering these monasteries globally and claiming for Vatican use what often amounts to millions of euros in assets and property.

One priest wrote to LifeSite the following commentary on the situation in Philadelphia:

As a priest close to the Carmel for decades, it seems that clergy in authority is abusing the faith and piety of good nuns and religious. Blind obedience has never meant blindly obeying no matter what. In the traditional understanding we obey our [superiors] within their competency regardless of their faults. For example, when a [superior] tells us to fast more or to pray a Rosary every day, we obey regardless of whether our superior does the same. However, when our superior orders something immoral or contrary to law and tradition or common sense, we cannot obey.

We must be as gentle as doves and as wise as serpents. Cloistered religious, I encourage you to stand firm and do not allow petty and greedy bishops and priests to abuse you. Stand firm; otherwise, we may lose our monasteries all together.

Prominent Pennsylvania layman Brian Middleton has been involved in efforts to preserve the Philadelphia Carmel. He told LifeSite:

My last contact with Carmel situation was September of 2021. I can give you a summary of our involvement up to then.

In the Spring of 2021 I was asked to be part of a conference call regarding the situation at Philly Carmel. Prior to that call I had no prior knowledge of the situation. After doing some research on the recent Vatican Documents regarding the traditional church and talking with a couple of Subject Matter experts I decided to see if I could be of assistance. We put together a team of faithful Catholics and secured legal representation for Mother and the Carmel. In addition we put together a plan to protect the assets of the Carmel from what from the beginning was an attempt to plunder this spiritual mitochondrial institution of Our traditional church.

As is often the case in these spiritual battles, evil preys on the innocent, trusting nature of its victims. I believe it was difficult for Mother Pia and her group of loyal benefactors to believe they were being lied to, bullied and manipulated by the very people who should be leading, protecting and inspiring her to a greater closeness to Our Lord. Mother and her team were not able to execute on the plan to save the Carmel. Their tragic flaw was that they trusted a local prelate and their Vatican visitors. They could not conceive that their visitors were on a mission to destroy Carmel. My last meeting was in September of 2021. It involved a Vatican team of two nuns and a priest. Mother also invited a larger group of her advisors and benefactors. Unfortunately, they treated the visitors as if they were there to help and partner in preserving the Carmel. It was clear to me the visitors were not on an honorable mission of compromise. I then communicated to Mother my thoughts and concerns and told her that I would be available to help execute on our original plan but I could not participate in a lie of collaborating with these people who obviously had an agenda of suppression and plunder. We have to stop pretending that we don't know what we know. It is well past time to think the unthinkable. For the record, if the Vatican and the local Bishop had been forthright and direct in their plans and reasoning I probably would not have engaged. Unfortunately they were either non communicative or somewhat duplicitous at the outset.

Kenneth A. Gavin, the chief communications officer for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, issued the following statement to LifeSiteNews:

In the summer of 2021, the Carmelite nuns who had been living at the Carmelite Monastery of Philadelphia, made the decision to transfer to the Carmelite Monastery of Valparaiso, Nebraska. That action was surprising and taken of their own volition. They were neither asked nor forced to leave.

It was with great sadness that we learned of that development as it resulted in leaving a sole surviving member at the Philadelphia Carmel. At that time, the first priority was to provide for her residency, future welfare, and life as a consecrated religious. As living alone at the Monastery was not a tenable long term solution and no other Carmelites came to Philadelphia, the last Carmelite nun moved and the Carmel was left empty.

Following a visitation process, the Holy See directed the suppression of the Carmel in February of this year. For nearly 120 years, the people of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia have deeply valued and benefitted greatly from the presence, charism, and spirituality of the Carmelite nuns. The presence of this Carmel in the history and life of Philadelphia Catholics has been significant and we are deeply grateful for it.

At this time, representatives of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia are working with appropriate parties to carry out the directives of the Holy See in a manner that respects the sacred dignity of the Carmel.

LifeSite also reached out to Mother Pia of Jesus Crucified, the remaining nun of the now-suppressed monastery; Archbishop Chaput, the former archbishop of Philadelphia; and Sister Mary Elizabeth, the president of St. Joseph's Association, but have yet to receive a response. Brody Hale, a member of the board that was established to preserve the Carmelite monastery in Philadelphia and its assets, declined to comment at this point.

Dr. Maïke Hickson was born and raised in Germany. She holds a PhD from the University of Hannover, Germany, after having written in Switzerland her doctoral dissertation on the history of Swiss intellectuals before and during World War II. She now lives in the U.S. and is married to Dr. Robert Hickson, and they have been blessed with two beautiful children. She is a happy housewife who likes to write articles when time permits.

Dr. Hickson published in 2014 a Festschrift, a collection of some thirty essays written by thoughtful authors in honor of her husband upon his 70th birthday, which is entitled *A Catholic Witness in Our Time*.

Hickson has closely followed the papacy of Pope Francis and the [developments](#) in the Catholic Church in Germany, and she has been writing articles on religion and politics for U.S. and European publications and websites such as LifeSiteNews, OnePeterFive, The Wanderer, Rorate Caeli, [Catholicism.org](#), Catholic Family News, Christian Order, Notizie Pro-Vita, [Catholic Church](#), Corrispondenza Romana, Katholisches.info, Der Dreizehnte, Zeit-Fragen, and [Tagesblatt](#).

[Archdiocese Of Philadelphia](#)

[Carmelites](#)

[Cor Orans](#)

[Fairfield Carmelites](#)