

**“FATHER CHARLES COUGHLIN”**

**By Peter B. Orlik**

***Encyclopedia of Radio***

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## FATHER CHARLES COUGHLIN

In the 1930s, Father Charles E. Coughlin, the "Radio Priest" from Royal Oak, Michigan, used the medium to assemble the largest congregation in the history of Christianity and became the first Catholic priest to make a serious impact on the U.S. political scene.

Coughlin was born of a Canadian mother and Irish-American father in Hamilton, Ontario in 1891. He earned an honors degree in philosophy at the University of Toronto's St. Michael's College where he then entered the Basilian novitiate. After ordination in 1916, he assisted in several Michigan parishes. When the Basilians were disbanded, Coughlin chose to become a diocesan priest and was formally accepted into the Detroit diocese by Bishop Michael Gallagher in 1923. Already enjoying a reputation as a pulpit orator, his masses at the churches to which he was temporarily assigned regularly played to overflow crowds.

In 1926, Coughlin became pastor of the just-dedicated Shrine of the Little Flower parish in Royal Oak, four miles up Woodward Avenue from Detroit's northern city limits. Though the parish had only twenty-five families at its inception, the enterprising young priest built a church to hold 600 people. The building process was anything but troublefree. Raising funds for the new parish proved difficult and the Ku Klux Klan, fearful of an increasing Catholic populace in the area, burned a cross on the church lawn. Fortunately, Coughlin was introduced to Leo

Fitzpatrick, station manager of powerful WJR, who was taken by the young pastor's plight. Fitzpatrick suggested that Coughlin employ his oratorical skills over WJR in order to create a more sympathetic climate for the Shrine parish and appeal for financial support.

Originally entitled the "Golden Hour of the Little Flower," Coughlin's first broadcast was relayed from the Shrine on October 3, 1926. Initially, the program was intended for children, but gradually shifted to adult topics on the economic and political perils facing the country. For Coughlin soon discovered that such subjects struck a responsive chord with listeners, resulting in correspondence that often contained financial contributions. He organized the Radio League of the Little Flower (annual membership fee one dollar) to stimulate donations which, in turn, allowed him to purchase more radio exposure. In 1929, he bought time on Cincinnati's powerful WLW and began negotiations to add WMAQ, Chicago, as his enterprise's third station. Because WMAQ was a CBS-owned outlet, the matter was referred to network headquarters in New York. As a result, Coughlin was sold time on the CBS network. National visibility was at hand.

The cost of airtime soon was dwarfed by the rising tide of contributions that his widely-distributed program elicited. As the Depression set in, Coughlin's offensive against the twin evils of communism and international banking resonated with many and further increased the popularity of his broadcasts. But when Coughlin's attacks became more specific and mentioned President Herbert Hoover by name, CBS became nervous. Edward Klauber, the

network's executive vice president, requested that the priest submit scripts for advanced clearance. Coughlin's response came in his January 4, 1931 broadcast when he asked his listeners whether or not CBS should be allowed to censor him. CBS was inundated with 1,250,000 letters of protest --- and Coughlin's messages were never pre-screened.

CBS eased him off its air the following April and NBC was not interested in being Coughlin's replacement chain. So WJR's Fitzpatrick contacted Alfred McCosker, his counterpart at WOR, New York. Together, they set up a telephone-linked group of eleven stations that was expanded to twenty-six outlets from Maine to Colorado by the autumn of 1932. Weekly cost for the land lines and airtime was \$14,000.

Coughlin's program now openly laid blame for the Depression on President Hoover --- and over a million letters of support poured in. Royal Oak's first post office was established to cope with the correspondence and the priest became the subject of feature articles in radio fan magazines. His superior, Bishop Gallagher, was a firm supporter of Coughlin's social justice agenda so grumblings from prominent east coast cardinals were of no concern. Thousands of visitors, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, made pilgrimages to the Shrine church, now graced by an imposing 150-foot stone tower upon which was carved a floodlit crucifix. Coughlin's radio speeches, composed in a small study at the top of the tower, increased in vehemence and popularity. A poll conducted by WOR named him the nation's most useful citizen of 1933. And when WCAU asked its Philadelphia listeners

whether they wanted Father Coughlin or the New York Philharmonic on Sunday afternoon, there were 187,000 votes for the cleric and only 12,000 for the musicians.

Coughlin cheered the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and remained a staunch supporter throughout 1933. The priest's resonant brogue and passionate oratory advocated the nationalization of gold and re-valuation of the dollar --- policies that were originally favored by the Roosevelt administration as well. But Roosevelt never warmed to the "Radio Priest" and never extended to him the counsellor status that Coughlin thought he deserved. So on November 11, 1934, Coughlin announced the formation of the National Union for Social Justice to independently lobby for his social and economic proposals. The break with Roosevelt became complete when his administration proposed joining the World Court; an entity Coughlin considered a tool of international bankers. His January 27, 1935 broadcast was a blistering attack on the proposal, resulting in 200,000 protest letters to Congress; a key factor in the government's abandonment of the plan.

Coughlin's Social Justice movement now converged with the Share-Our-Wealth platform of Louisiana's bombastic Senator Huey Long. But in September, 1935, Long was assassinated. The news reached President Roosevelt during a meeting with Joseph P. Kennedy (father of the later president) and Coughlin; a conference Kennedy had arranged in an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the two. The next year, Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice joined with Long's Share-Our-Wealthers to create

the Union Party and endorse the presidential bid of North Dakota Congressman William Lemke. The priest also founded his own newspaper, Social Justice Weekly, that soon achieved a circulation of one million copies. Such success emboldened Coughlin to promise that he would leave radio if he could not deliver nine million votes to Lemke. When Lemke garnered less than one million ballots, Coughlin honored this pledge and took leave of his broadcast on November 7, 1936.

Three months later, he was back on the air, rationalizing that this turnabout only occurred because it was the dying wish of his supportive superior, Bishop Gallagher. For the next two years, Coughlin continued his broadcast attacks on Roosevelt's New Deal and its failure to adopt the monetary reforms the priest advocated. Beginning in mid-1938, with European war clouds gathering, Coughlin began to focus more on international affairs. In his November 20 radio program, he excused German Nazism as a necessary defense mechanism against communism and supported the Nazi theory that Jewish bankers were behind the Russian Revolution. For the next year, his broadcasts took a more and more anti-Semitic tone.

But in October, 1939, fearing government retaliation for the strident broadcast oratory of Coughlin and other radical political voices, the National Association of Broadcasters' Code Committee placed strict limitations on the sale of radio time to "spokesmen of controversial public issues." As the priest's airtime was all purchased at commercial rates, this new self-policing edict gradually eroded his network as his contracts with

stations expired. He cancelled his 1940-41 season (the program had always taken a summer hiatus) and never returned to the airwaves. On May 1, 1942, Coughlin's banishment from the public stage was complete when, acting upon a request relayed by Roosevelt emissary Leo Crowley as well as concerns emanating from the Vatican, Coughlin's new superior, Archbishop Francis Mooney, ordered him to cease all writings and nonreligious activities for the duration of the war --- or be defrocked.

Always the obedient priest, Coughlin immediately abandoned publication of Social Justice, allowed the government to revoke its second class mailing privilege, and retreated to the role of Shrine pastor, in which he served until his retirement in 1966.

At the height of his prominence, Father Coughlin had a listenership of upwards of 30 million, received 400,000 letters per week, and was featured twice on the cover of Newsweek. In stark contrast, from 1966 until his death a decade later, the Radio Priest lived unobtrusively in a small apartment behind his beloved Shrine of the Little Flower.

Peter B. Orlik

#### **FURTHER READING**

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## End Notes

Charles Edward Coughlin  
1891-1979

Born in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, 25 October 1891. Only child of Thomas Coughlin and Amelia Mahoney. Honors degree in philosophy, University of Toronto's St. Michael's College, 1911; St. Basil's Seminary, 1911-1916; ordained to the priesthood, 1916; taught in Canadian Basilian schools, then served in several Michigan parishes; accepted into Detroit diocese, 1923; pastor, Shrine of the Little Flower parish (Royal Oak, Michigan) 1926-1966; Sunday afternoon radio broadcast, Golden Hour of the Little Flower, 1926-1942 (carried on CBS, 1929-1931); founded National Union for Social Justice, 1934; ordered off the air, 1942; retired, 1966. Died in Birmingham, Michigan, U.S.A., 27 October 1979.

### RADIO SERIES

1926-1942, Golden Hour of the Little Flower

### STAGE

prominent political speaker throughout 1930s (filled New York's Madison Square Garden, 22 May 1935)

### PUBLICATION

Social Justice Weekly, 1936-1942.