REEXAMINING A NATIONAL DISASTER:
THE LOCAL CHARLES E. COUGHLIN AND THE COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE

Victoria Marie Harwood

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2016

Committee:
Rebecca Mancuso, Advisor
Michael Brooks
ABSTRACT

Rebecca Mancuso, Advisor

During the late 1920s and through the 1930s, Father Coughlin was broadcasted nationwide. However, by 1935, it became apparent that he harbored racist sentiments, and as his popularity grew, so did his extremist tendencies. When he was officially silenced, much of the nation regarded him and still regards him as intolerant and infamous. However, this is not the full picture of the life of Father Coughlin or where his story ended. Although Coughlin may have been brash, ignorant, and quasi-fascist in his ideology, he was much more than the harsh national figure. This being said, very few historians have examined Father Coughlin in his locality, which is where Coughlin was, at many times, a strikingly different character.

By assessing news articles written about him in the local newspapers, analyzing the archived records and figures and the history of Coughlin’s parish, examining Father Coughlin’s radio broadcasts and Social Justice, evaluating funerary items, and integrating other documents from the priest’s past, this project argues that Father Coughlin was an important and valued figure in his parish and the community. After his removal from the national eye, Father Coughlin was still considered an important and reverend figure in the community as memorialized in various materials such as yearbooks and in the memories of the people of metropolitan Detroit who, in many cases, tended to share his views and experienced a side to Coughlin that met their needs and concerns. These memories, and thus this research, showcase a more personal, local side of Father Coughlin rather than an impersonal, nationalist figure while, by no means, advocating his obvious flaws. Furthermore, while not all the memories are positive, and admirers of Coughlin dwindled throughout the years, Coughlin was never forgotten in his community, and he is still remembered today.
For My Family and My Fiancé
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many that I owe countless thanks to for their help, encouragement, and guidance through the entire process of constructing my thesis project. First, I would like to thank the History Department at Benedictine University for first introducing me to Michel-Rolph Trouillot who inspired me to always investigate the silences in history.

Second, none of this would have been possible if it was not for Dr. Rebecca Mancuso. Not only was her local history class the inspiration for my project, but she helped shape my project into what it is today. Without her guidance, scholarly insight, and much needed advice, I may have never been able to truly discover my own voice in my project. Dr. Michael Brooks also deserves many thanks for his time and commitment to reading through my project and inspiring me to examine different areas of my thesis more fully. I also want to thank Dr. Ruth Herndon. While she did not directly contribute to my project, her classes my last year of my program helped me to look at my project in a whole new light. It is because of her, along with my advisor and reader, that my project is what it is today.

I would also like to thank the Royal Oak Public Library, Northwestern University Library Special Collections, University of Detroit Mercy Special Collections, Bowling Green State University Archives, and especially the Royal Oak Historical Society for all their help in the process of writing my thesis. If it was not for everyone at the Royal Oak Historical Society and their vast collections on Father Coughlin and the Royal Oak community I could have never finished my project. Author Sheldon Marcus also deserves much of my gratitude since it was his hard work in writing his book and all the notes he left behind at Northwestern University that made my journey much easier.

Finally, I want to thank my family and my fiancé. Your never ending support and faith in me is what kept me going. You had big dreams for me; I hope I exceeded them.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE (IN)FAMOUS FATHER COUGHLIN: AN INTRODUCTION ................................. 1

CHAPTER ONE: THE NATIONAL COUGHLIN AND TREATMENT OF COUGHLIN IN
THE LITERATURE ....................................................................................................... 6

Coughlin’s National Personality of the 1930s and 1940s ........................................ 7

Historians of the 1960s .......................................................................................... 14

Historians of the 1970s and 1980s ......................................................................... 17

Historians of the 1990s and Beyond ..................................................................... 19

CHAPTER TWO: FROM YOUNG PASTOR TO RADIO BROADCASTER: THE EARLY
YEARS OF FATHER COUGHLIN ............................................................................ 24

The Beginning .......................................................................................................... 24

Coughlin and the Ku Klux Klan .............................................................................. 30

From Local Idol to National Personality ................................................................ 38

CHAPTER THREE: IN ALL HIS GLORY: THE LOCAL COMMUNITY’S RESPONSE TO
FATHER COUGHLIN ............................................................................................... 43

Coughlin’s Community: The People of Royal Oak .................................................. 44

Building the Community ......................................................................................... 47

A Continued Success in the Early 1930s ............................................................... 50

Fanning the Flames of 1936: A Church Ablaze and Fiery Publication............... 51

A Final Goodbye and the Return of the Radio Priest: Early 1937 ......................... 56

An Enemy in the Making ......................................................................................... 58

Being Active and Being Bold in 1939 ..................................................................... 61
THE (IN)FAMOUS FATHER COUGHLIN: AN INTRODUCTION

During the early to mid-20th century, there were many powerful figures beginning to mark their place in United States history. In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt worked to pull the United States out the worst financial crisis in its history. Adolph Hitler was beginning to reshape Europe and start one of the deadliest genocides of all time. In a small, relatively unknown town in southeastern Michigan, a young Roman Catholic priest was also beginning to make a name for himself. He began as a simple parish priest creating from the ground up a national shrine, but he later became famous for his widely popular radio shows broadcasted throughout the country. This man’s name was Charles Edward Coughlin.

During the late 1920s and through the 1930s, Father Coughlin’s radio newscast was broadcasted nationwide and attracted millions of listeners. However, it soon became apparent that he harbored racist sentiments, and as his popularity grew, so did his extremist tendencies. As the 1940s approached, Coughlin continually chastised President Roosevelt and made anti-Semitic slurs. Eventually, the public and the Catholic Church asked that he be taken off the air. With his radio show silenced, Coughlin began to concentration on his periodical Social Justice, which continued to showcase his opinions and ideals; at its peak it had nearly 1.2 million paid subscribers. That too eventually ended, and much of the nation regarded him, and still regards him, as intolerant and infamous.

However, this is not the full picture of the life of Father Coughlin or where his story ended. Of the few historians who wrote interpretations of the priest’s life, many chose to center their accounts on Coughlin’s fall into shame and obscurity; however, there is much more to Father Coughlin than has been assessed in these works. Of the few complete histories that have

---

1 Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, National Shrine of the Little Flower Historical Timeline, November 17, 2005.
2 Ibid
been written about Coughlin and his life, most center on his national influence. In these national histories, Father Coughlin’s brash manner, ignorant thoughts, and fascist comments are displayed and analyzed, but his life on the local level is mostly ignored. Although Father Coughlin may have been brash, ignorant, and quasi-fascist in his ideology, he was much more than the harsh national figure. This being said, very few historians have examined Father Coughlin in his locality, which is where Coughlin was, at many times, a strikingly different character.

Although Father Coughlin’s anti-Semitic and offensive behavior displayed in his radio newscasts and periodicals from the late 1930s into the early 1940s cannot be ignored, denied, or validated, his contributions to and his behavior in Royal Oak, his home, and the Metro-Detroit community likewise cannot be overlooked. His legacy is complex. Nationally, for the most part, Father Coughlin is remembered for his outlandish racist accusations and comments showcased in his radio broadcasts, some of his writing, and later through the works of historians and academics. For example, Coughlin exhibited antipathy towards communism, President Roosevelt, and the money lenders, an occupation he associated with the Jewish community, all which is highlighted in the first chapter and throughout the proceeding chapters. Prior to his retirement he even appeared reluctant to accept the Civil Rights Movement. In his parish and in the local community, however, Father Coughlin has been remembered for being well-established, hardworking, and, for the most part, well respected and even adored. This project sets out to answer the following questions: who was the local Father Coughlin? How did he differ from the national Coughlin? What did he do in his own community that caused him to develop such a strong local following despite his dwindling support in the national community? How is he remembered today? How has his legacy been remembered and preserved?
By assessing news articles written about him in the local newspapers (especially the Royal Oak newspaper *The Daily Tribune*), analyzing the archived records and figures and the history of Coughlin’s parish, examining Father Coughlin’s radio broadcasts and *Social Justice*, evaluating funerary items, and integrating other documents from the priest’s past (including interviews with and about Coughlin), it is clear that Father Coughlin was an important and valued figure in his parish and the community. After his removal from the national eye, Father Coughlin was still considered an important and reverend figure in the community as memorialized in various materials such as yearbooks and in the memories of the people of metropolitan Detroit who, in many cases, tended to share his views and experienced a side to Coughlin that met their needs and concerns. These memories, and thus this research, showcase a more personal, local side of Father Coughlin rather than an impersonal, nationalist figure while, by no means, advocating his obvious flaws. Furthermore, while not all the memories are positive, and admirers of Coughlin dwindled throughout the years, Coughlin was never forgotten in his community, and he is still remembered today.

This project came from the desire to document the local history of Father Coughlin. Many people outside his community do not remember his place in history, and with his parish making headlines, it is important that his history be assessed once again. In the last few years, his parish, the National Shrine of the Little Flower Catholic Basilica, has suffered through some challenging times and celebrated joyous occasions. In the beginning of the decade, the University of Detroit Mercy finished uploading its collection of Coughlin documents that were once inaccessible to the public, making it possible for historians to begin researching Coughlin once again and in a new light. At the end of 2013, the parish lost their beloved parish leader, Monsignor Easton, who died suddenly leaving the parish to pick up the pieces and find someone
new to run the fairly large parish. However, just over a year later, the parish was also named a national basilica, only one of two in the state of Michigan. With the designation of the parish, the availability of new documentation of Coughlin, and even the great loss of Monsignor Easton, it seemed a fitting time to take a fresh look at the controversial priest.

This project is broken down into four main parts. The first part briefly examines some of the national controversy surrounding Father Coughlin and the scholarship on the radio priest, which includes what historians, scholars, and journalists have said about Coughlin throughout the decades. The second part will showcase how Father Coughlin came to Royal Oak, established his parish, and dealt with a major problem in the area: the Ku Klux Klan. The chapter also focuses on the nationalization of Coughlin, or, in other words, how and why the rhetoric of the radio priest began to attract not only a local audience but also a national one.

The third part will focus on mostly news articles from the height of Coughlin’s influence in Royal Oak, the 1930s, and the surrounding area to present what he did for and in his locality and how the local community viewed him and his parish. At times just being a present and active member in the community was enough for him to gain approval. The final part of this thesis focuses on the life of Coughlin in the period after the fall of his radio show and journal until his death. The main focus, however, is on the local memory of Father Coughlin after his death. This section draws from interviews from people who knew Father Coughlin and remember him today as well as his guestbook from his funeral, yearbooks from the high school he created, and newspaper articles. This segment refutes the claims made by the author of *The Ghost of Royal Oak* and other historians that after 1936, Father Coughlin was no more than a ghost in Royal Oak, desperate for any attention. This section showcases that even after his death, Father Coughlin and his works cannot be forgotten. In the end, this project’s main goal is to reexamine
a discredited national figure and ultimately national disaster and revisit areas in his life that much of the nation could not or would not see. This project provides an inside look at the local Charles E. Coughlin.
CHAPTER ONE: THE NATIONAL COUGHLIN AND TREATMENT OF COUGHLIN IN THE LITERATURE

During the late 1920s and into the early 1940s, few American religious leaders were as well-known to the general public as Father Charles E. Coughlin. Although Coughlin began his career as the head pastor of a small wooden Catholic church in the Detroit metropolitan area, by the mid-to-late 1930s, Coughlin had millions of radio show listeners and a noteworthy shrine. However, by the early 1940s, Coughlin’s national fame turned to infamy with his radio broadcasts and periodicals becoming increasingly reactionary and anti-Semitic. By the end of the 1940s, Coughlin had become a national villain in eyes of many Americans.

Since the 1930s, there have been approximately seventy works that include at least a short history or introduction of the life of Coughlin. Of the more comprehensive histories that have been written about him and his life, it is Father Coughlin’s national life that is, more times than not, showcased. In these national histories, Father Coughlin’s brash manner, base populism, and fascist ideology are prominently depicted, but his life on the local level is mostly ignored. This first section is dedicated to examining what previous historians, as well as other scholars and journalist, have stated about the national Father Coughlin. What is revealed through examining these histories is the clear lack local attention and, therefore, a necessity to expand on the topic.¹

¹ The histories presented in these pages are just a sample of the histories written about Father Coughlin. As mentioned above, there have been approximately seventy books that dedicate at least a few pages to Father Coughlin’s life. However, in this project not all of them can be addressed. Some books are more prevalent than others, and the ones presented in this first chapter are some of the most popular, intriguing, or well-respected books related to the radio priest. Yet, that does not mean some of the other selections are not worthwhile to read. Other selections on Coughlin include Richard Akin Davis, Radio Priest: The Public Career of Father Charles Edward Coughlin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) and James Patrick Cannon and Joseph Hansen, What is American Fascism?: Writings on Father Coughlin, Mayor Frank Hague, and Senator Joseph McCarthy (New York: National Education Dept., Socialist Workers Party, 1976). For a full list of major works written on Father Coughlin see “Bibliography of Work about Father Coughlin,” A Historical Exploration of Father Charles E. Coughlin’s Influence, http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/coughlin/bibliography.php.
Coughlin’s National Personality of the 1930s and 1940s

The national Coughlin, as presented in histories written about him, did not begin to emerge until the mid-1930s. Although many historians would paint Father Coughlin as a villain in their accounts of his life, in the early 1930s, the cleric gathered some praise. This is not shocking since it was in the early 1930s when Father Coughlin was nationally popular and before he had uttered Anti-Semitic comments on his radio show. When he first began his radio show, Coughlin stuck to religious themes, and if he was feeling risky, he attacked the Ku Klux Klan and proponents of birth control. At the show’s peak he had over ten million listeners on any given Sunday and averaged the largest radio audience in the world.2

One of the first biographies of Father Coughlin is, in actuality, one of the most detailed accounts of his life. Written in 1933 at the height of the priest’s success, Ruth Mugglebee published a biography of Coughlin titled *Father Coughlin of the Shrine of the Little Flower: An Account of the Life, Work, and Message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin*. As stated previously, the book is incredibly detailed beginning by assessing the life of Coughlin’s mother and the priest’s childhood in Canada. Largely a hagiography, she paints him as a modest boy growing up to be a reverent leader. At times she claims Coughlin to be shy and coy, constructing her narrative to include his feelings and emotional reactions like blushing to compliments made by strangers.3 Mugglebee also echoes the needs and wants of the people in his community claiming that “Father Coughlin stretched out a helping hand to reach them and make their meager lives a bit happier and a bit more comfortable.”4 While the book, at times, assesses Coughlin through rose-colored glasses, it is one of the few that actually makes an attempt to showcase Coughlin’s

---


4 Ibid., 205.
importance and works in his community. Later accounts are influenced by Coughlin’s national shame and appear to forget or miss the priest’s importance to his community.

Another account of Coughlin’s life was published in the same year as Mugglebee’s and mirrors the same admiration that Mugglebee had for Coughlin. Louis B. Ward’s *Father Charles E. Coughlin: An Authorized Biography* was influenced by information related to the author by Bishop Michael Gallagher, the bishop who gave the young radio priest his own parish. The book is not especially objective with Ward continually praising the talented orator and his works in the Catholic Church. While Ward refuses to acknowledge the negative characteristics attributed to Father Coughlin, the book does provide an interesting account of his life by focusing some attention on his local life that the historians to follow would ignore.

However, the books that followed had no trouble pointing out the negative aspects of Coughlin’s career since by the conclusion of 1935 Coughlin was clearly spiraling downward. By the mid-1930s as Detroit and the rest of the country remained mired in an economic depression, Coughlin’s tone changed. He began to attack communism since he believed it was in part responsible for the failing economy. In some of the earliest publications of Coughlin’s periodicals, communism is mentioned and denounced numerous times. In one specific periodical published in February of 1937, Coughlin even dedicated an entire article outlining the dangers of communism to Christianity. He made certain claims as Communism “denies the immortality of the soul, thereby indicating a serious misconception of human nature.”

By this time Father Coughlin had also begun to invest much of his time in politics like never before. His participation in the Union Party even took him away from his radio show for

---

some time and exhausted him to the point of collapsing on stage. It was during this point in his life that his anti-Semitic undertones became even more pronounced in his speeches, writing, and radio shows. He also fully articulated his discontent with President Roosevelt, claiming that Roosevelt was “anti-God” and at times resorting to slander. By 1939, Coughlin made his opinions clear about World War II in Europe stating that the United States should for no reason enter the war. Yet it appeared he viewed the work of both the fascists in Italy and the Nazis with admiration, only causing more of his national listeners to question the moral soundness of the priest and validity of his opinions in his broadcasts.8

In 1935, approximately one year before the priest really began to attain a negative image, author Raymond Gram Swing, author of the book *Forerunners of American Fascism*, was already comparing many of Father Coughlin’s previous speeches with those made by Nazi leader Adolf Hitler. While the accusations made by Swing may have been somewhat extreme and premature, he was still the first to see Coughlin’s spiral into quasi-facism. In 1939, three more books were published all sharing a common theme; all assessed speeches or articles by Father Coughlin which they used to convey a particular view of the priest. Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee’s book *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin’s Speech* does exactly as the title suggests; it examines the speeches Coughlin made and how they were used as a form of propaganda. In the account the authors claim that the speeches made by Father Coughlin indicate that he was a fascist supporter and against democracy.9 The book, while not entirely impartial, is a useful resource for one looking to examine many of the national speeches made by Father Coughlin during his lifetime. A.B. Magil, author of *The Real Father Coughlin*,

came to the same conclusions as the Lees believing Coughlin to be a fascist supporter and a Nazi sympathizer and an anti-Semite.10

In most accounts of Father Coughlin’s national life it is anti-Semitism that is often highlighted. This not surprising since there are numerous cases where Father Coughlin made derogatory comments about the Jewish population as a whole, yet his rationales behind his feelings are quite complex and should be examined in context. Coughlin’s dislike of the Jewish population stemmed from his dislike of communism. Coughlin continually blamed communism on the Jewish population claiming that since they never officially expressed their disproval of it, it made them to one of the main perpetrators of it. His dislike only heightened when he claimed that those adhering to Judaism never expressed sympathy for the Catholics that were persecuted under communism.11 He even went as far as to claim that the Jewish population was a special privileged class in Russia because of their supposed allegiance to the government, which was not the case.12

In Father Coughlin, His “Facts” and Arguments written by the General Jewish Council, all of these concepts are highlighted. These authors demonstrate through Coughlin’s writings or other articles written about the priest that Father Coughlin tended to harbor anti-Semitic feelings. The General Jewish Council even compared Coughlin to Hitler because of his anti-Jewish ideology and his subjective appropriation of Nazi ideology in his Social Justice magazines.13 According to the authors, in Germany during the late 1930s, Coughlin was even considered a hero. A special correspondent for the New York Times in a 1938 issue affirms this belief by reporting that, in Nazi Germany, “The German hero in America for the moment is Rev. Charles

12 Ibid., 36.
13 Ibid., 32-39.
E. Coughlin because of his radio speech representing national socialism as a defensive front against bolshevism.\textsuperscript{14}

By the end of the 1930s, the radio priest was taken off the air. He then turned fully to his periodical, \textit{Social Justice}, but within a few years, the publication also ceased production.\textsuperscript{15} With all his extreme rhetoric flying through the airwaves and in print and the quick fall from grace and national attention, it is not surprising that the books published in the 1940s painted quite a negative picture of the national Coughlin. Reverend William C. Kernan’s \textit{The Ghost of Royal Oak} was published in 1940 and quickly dismisses Coughlin’s importance and relevance. The author condemns the work of Father Coughlin and claims that after 1936, Father Coughlin was no more than a forgotten spirit in Royal Oak, desperate for any attention. Kernan even goes as far as to state that “Father Coughlin was the symbol—the symbol of danger to America.”\textsuperscript{16} Kernan’s book, like the others, was a clear response to the times and publicity surrounding Coughlin. The radio priest had just fallen from grace and appeared to be trying to claw his way into the national circuit once more, but, as time would tell, Coughlin would never fall into obscurity in his own community.

1940 also produced two more accounts of the life of Father Coughlin, John L. Spivak’s \textit{Shrine of the Silver Dollar} and \textit{An Answer to Father Coughlin’s Critics} by Father Coughlin’s Friends. Spivak’s book focuses on the priest’s supposed support of Hitler and Nazi ideals as well as his financial operations. Spivak claims that Father Coughlin collected several dollars from his followers in order to “save America” and “save Christianity.”\textsuperscript{17} However, the author claims that

\textsuperscript{15} Karen G. Ketchaver, “Father Charles E. Coughlin—The ‘Radio Priest’ of the 1930s,” \textit{Theological Librarianship} 2, no. 2 (2009): 86.
Coughlin used the money for unlawful purposes turning his place of worship into “Shrine of the Sliver Dollar.”

Spivak was even able to speak with Coughlin’s lawyer regarding all the accusations against him, especially in concerns with his involvement in the stock market and his use of donations for corporate means. According to the interview, Mr. E. Prewitt Semmes, the priest’s attorney, let it slip that the Social Justice Publishing Company was in the church, something that was denied previously and seemingly disallowed. Nevertheless, the lawyer, through the interview, appeared to produce some information on Coughlin’s shady money dealings. Almost three decades later, author Sheldon Marcus would try to gain an interview with this same lawyer, and based on archival records, it appears that Sheldon was somewhat successful. After successfully contacting the lawyer in October of 1968 to help him with his dissertation, he attempted to contact him again to clarify some information for his book in December of the following year. It is unclear if he was able to reach him again since no letter follows, but the willingness of the lawyer to cooperate with another historian poses questions. Did the lawyer want to redeem himself or get some facts straight? In Marcus’s account, which will be examined later in the thesis, Semmes does not provide any damnable evidence towards Coughlin and the Social Justice even claiming it to not be a Catholic publication. With all these contradicting and confusing allegations, the truth may never be clear.

An Answer to Father Coughlin’s Critics is quite unique and does not follow the same patterns as the previous publications of the late 1930s and the 1940s. This book traces the assertions made by critics of Father Coughlin, such as his anti-Semitism, and judges if the facts

---

18 Ibid., viii.
19 Ibid., 92-94.
20 See Marcus-Semmes Letters, Northwestern University Father Coughlin Special Collections, Box 4.
presented are reliable. For the most part, the book works to contradict many of the claims made by the General Jewish Counsel in their account, and it excuses many extremist views of Coughlin. The book is written by friends of Coughlin and reads as if a group of friends was explaining or even justifying the behavior of another, a practice commonly upheld by Bishop Michael Gallagher. The work is not entirely complimentary like the accounts of the early 1930s, but it is the only one written in a decade and a half to defend or provide any positive comments on the radio priest.

At the end of the decade Wallace Stegner published an article in The Aspirin Age: 1919-1941 titled “The Radio Priest and His Flock.” Published in 1949, the book traces events and people from around the globe who were influential during the 23-year period of the “Aspirin Age.” The “Aspirin Age,” as described by the editor of the volume, Isabel Leighton, is the time between the two great wars in which the United States was a “strange, uncharted, and enchanted land; so many personalities and events that challenged our imaginations during that time now seem almost to have been part of a spell.” Furthermore, she claims, “During these throbbing years we searched in vain for a cure-all, coming no closer to it than the aspirin bottle. Hence: The Aspirin Age.” In a time of prohibition and the Great Depression, some reached out for men like Coughlin who seemed if he could cure all their problems.

Stegner, like Kernan, is very critical of Coughlin believing his voice attributed greatly to the support he gathered in the previous decade. He stated “It was without a doubt one of the greatest speaking voices of the twentieth century. Warmed by the touch of Irish brogue, it lingered over words and enriched their emotional content. It was a voice made for promises.”

24 Ibid., 234.
The article examines how this smooth, alluring voice caused millions to listen to Coughlin’s “abusive” speeches. Although Stegner includes some of his own commentary in his piece, the article is packed with interestingly detailed aspects of Coughlin’s life including how much he was paid to broadcast on the radio as well as how much he paid his editorial staff per week.\(^\text{25}\) This is also the first account to really address the priest’s *Social Justice* periodical in great detail. While the chapter devotes much of its attention to how Coughlin was able to influence the masses, the contents of the *Social Justice* are explored from when it began in 1936 to when it was formally ceased publication in 1942.\(^\text{26}\)

*Historians of the 1960s*

All but one of the books published in the late 1930s through the 1940s clearly paint Father Coughlin at his worst. While the books published in the early 1930s were not subtle in their praise of Father Coughlin, the ones that followed were just as forward about their criticisms since many Americans were still fuming about all the heated words Coughlin had muttered in his last years in the spotlight. However, the 1950s were, for the most part, silent. A few accounts were written during the decade, but they provide little of note. It appeared as if the country needed time to recover from the war and the negativity that figures such as Coughlin had unleashed. The 1960s brought with it three new accounts of Father Coughlin, all quite unique in their own way, although none truly ventured into examining the local Coughlin to a great extent. What they had in common was that they all presented new and distinctive ways of looking at Coughlin while attempting to present the whole facts, not just the negative or positive aspects of Coughlin’s life as first-hand accounts of Coughlin had in the previous decades.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 238.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 243-256.
In 1962 Gary Trade Marx published a paper titled *The Social Basis of the Support of a Depression Era Extremist: Father Coughlin* on the supporters of and objectors to Father Coughlin’s messages. Essentially the paper asks, “what are the social characteristics and political attitudes which differentiate those who support Coughlin in 1938 from those who oppose him?” While the paper did not appear to be widely circulated, it was truly the first to be somewhat unbiased in its approach to studying the priest showcasing both sides of the coin. Marx in no way condones Coughlin’s behavior, still believing him to be an extremist and fascist supporter, but he presents why some may have supported him, for example, those who were fairly downtrodden after the Great Depression.

In 1965 Charles J. Tull published *Father Coughlin and the New Deal*. This remains one of the most widely respected accounts of Coughlin’s life next to Alan Brinley’s work published in the 1980s. The book is a national history focusing most on Coughlin’s political ventures. However, the book does detail ever so briefly how Coughlin rose to fame in the public eye from being a small town pastor to becoming a nationally-known personality. The true value of the book for scholars of Coughlin is the information Tull presents on the organizations Coughlin was involved in during his lifetime and his political connections. Tull addresses Coughlin’s involvement with the National Union for Social Justice, founded in November of 1934, along with many other political and social organizations all designed to further Coughlin’s agenda, which usually went against that of FDR after 1935. While Coughlin is and will probably always be remembered for verbally attacking the Jewish community, the priest’s assaults on

---

28 Ibid., 61-72.
31 Ibid., 61.
President Roosevelt and his New Deal Policy are often understated in general accounts of Coughlin’s life.

In the beginning of Roosevelt’s career, Coughlin openly commended Roosevelt, even endorsing Roosevelt in early 1933. While at times the president did not always accomplish everything the young priest wanted, according to Tull, “he continued to pour voluminous praise upon Roosevelt at every opportunity in the apparent belief that the president would enact the necessary reforms, if given sufficient public support.” Yet despite Coughlin’s optimism, it soon became apparent that Roosevelt was never going to take the extreme measures Coughlin wanted, such as increasing inflation. In a fairly abrupt manner Coughlin abandoned his support for Roosevelt at the end of 1935 and began to publically criticize him on the radio. An article published in September of 1939 in the *Daily Tribune* reprinted a radio broadcast of Father Coughlin’s in which he denounces policies of the president. Coughlin attacks Roosevelt’s embargo repeal calling his viewers to send letters to the president to annul his action. This broadcast is just one of many in which Coughlin’s hatred for the president is captured.

In *Father Coughlin and the New Deal*, Tull illustrates this hatred, the falling out between Roosevelt and Coughlin, and the political establishments in which the cleric was involved. While all the details Tull highlights in his book regarding the national ambitions of Father Coughlin are not discussed in these pages, all the work Tull put into his book, such as mapping out Coughlin’s political life and his connections with Roosevelt, must not be overlooked. In 1969, David H. Bennett published *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party*,

While the last book published in the 1960s regarding Father Coughlin does not focus its full attention on the priest, it does showcase an interesting political history of Coughlin and his connection with the Union Party. Bennett’s account focuses its attention mostly on the priest’s connection with the Union Party rather than the FDR; however, the book fully acknowledges Coughlin’s disapproval of Roosevelt including a very detailed section on the priest’s attempts to nationalize silver and the president’s rejection of it.37

Historians of the 1970s and 1980s

The accounts of the 1960s were important because they were some of the first to present impartial and more focused accounts of Father Coughlin while still remaining national in scope. None ignored the blatant rhetoric of Coughlin’s arguments, but they all, more or less, presented the facts and analysis of his life while keeping their opinions unknown. Enough time had passed allowing historians to examine Coughlin’s life in greater detail while feeling less attached and personally victimized. In 1973 the book Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower was published, and it was the only account published during the decade. Like the three accounts published before it, it follows the trend of remaining impartial. The book is also the first biography of Coughlin in many years to serve as a complete biography rather than just concentrating on a specific aspect of the priest’s life. While the book is mostly nationally focused, it touches upon local events more than any other book in the most recent decades. The author, Sheldon Marcus, was the first since 1933 to be granted an interview with Father Coughlin himself, just a little under a decade before Coughlin’s passing. He was only one of a select few to be chosen to interview him and also appears to be one of the last if not the last.38

The book is very detailed, relating information about Coughlin’s childhood and connections with the Ku Klux Klan, information that could only be gathered from speaking to the priest, such as the type of puppy he had as a child and when he played with it. While the account is very unique and beneficial to the scholarship, the information must be taken with a grain of salt due to the fact that much of it comes from the mouth of Coughlin decades after his fall from grace. However, Marcus does attempt to use primary documents to supplement Coughlin’s testimony and points out the inconsistencies, for example, with the priest’s bank account and how he obtained the money. Marcus’s account is more a less a bibliography of Coughlin’s life, a more complete version of his dissertation. Yet, he does conclude that Coughlin was a complex figure enraging or encouraging many Americans throughout his career with his rhetoric and personality.

The 1980s also only produced one book on Coughlin, surprisingly since he died at the end of the previous decade. However, the book is considered one of the most respected books on the subject. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* was published in 1982, and while it was nationally focused, it does provide some insight into Coughlin’s local exploits just like the previous book. Author Karen G. Ketchaver states that Alan Brinkley’s book “is the prime resource for both a description and evaluation of the life and impact of Coughlin,” and few would disagree. *Voices of Protest* traces the lives of both Huey Long and Father Coughlin comparing their modest beginnings, eventual popularity, and downfall. The book is thoroughly researched, well-written, and arguably one of the most captivating accounts of Coughlin’s life and ideologies.

---

39 Ibid., 14.
40 Ibid., 53-54.
41 Karen G. Ketchaver, “Father Charles E. Coughlin—The ‘Radio Priest’ of the 1930s,” *Theological Librarianship* 2, no. 2 (2009), 81.
The book, like the ones produced in the 1960s and 1970s, is a mostly balanced account of the priest’s life presenting a full history of Coughlin’s successes and failures. At times the author almost appears to be somewhat understanding of the cleric’s actions whose unusual talents contributed to his rocky public career. This type of attitude is evident in such statements as, “from the beginning, however, Coughlin was a man of unusual abilities and unusual ambitions, a man with a vision of the priesthood that reflected his restless drive for achievement and his obsessive desire for acclaim. It was these traits, exhibited first in his youth that accounted for most of what was best and what was worst in Father Coughlin’s career.”42 It is clear that the author feels that Coughlin displayed both good and bad qualities in his youth that shaped the man he would later become, but he also seemed to regret the outcome of Coughlin’s life based on how much promise Coughlin had. The book, although not the newest account of Coughlin’s life, is still considered the most respected work to be produced on Father Coughlin based on the accuracy of Brinkley’s research and grandiloquence.

Historians of the 1990s and Beyond

In the 1990s, four accounts of Father Coughlin’s life were published. The first was published in 1991 by Mary Christine Athans titled The Coughlin-Fahey Connection. While many historians tend to forget this work due to its topic and research approach, it is a unique theological study of Coughlin focusing on his connection with Irish priest Denis Fahey. Fahey, as described by Coughlin, was “one of the most outstanding scholars in Ireland.” Fahey was not only a priest; he published various books, such as The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World, and was a professor at Blackrock Seminary in Dublin, Ireland during the early 20th

---

The book’s main emphasis seems to be on Fahey and his writings, but the author attempts to prove that Fahey’s works greatly influenced Coughlin who used them to justify his anti-Semitic attitude. For example, in a series of lectures preached over the airwaves between 1938 and 1939, Coughlin references Fahey and his works, which he uses to justify the distain he harbored towards the Jewish population and their ties to the Soviet Union and communism.\(^{44}\)

The author, while dealing with the topic of anti-Semitism, remains remarkably impartial stating that this behavior exhibited by Coughlin may or may not have been intentional. For example, the author states his disrespect towards the Jewish population may have stemmed from his hatred for communism causing him to incorrectly and possibly unknowingly tie them to the facilitation of communism. While this position may be a little naïve, it most likely stems from her clear respect for Fahey rather than Coughlin who drew from his writings and may have presented similar ideas as Coughlin. It is clear that Coughlin was not so unique in his feelings and attitudes. In the end, although the book in no way is a complete history of Coughlin, it is a unique theological resource.

In 1996 Donald Warren published one of the most complete histories of Father Coughlin titled *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio*. While the book is not as well read or widely referenced as the works of Tull or Brinkley, it is still considered one of the most prominent accounts. Warren attempts to provide a “full examination of the life he [Coughlin] led and the career he fashioned.”\(^{45}\) The book does, for the most part, trace the entire history of Coughlin. It appears to touch almost every aspect of Coughlin’s life in some way even including information on his life after his national career ended. Although the book is thoroughly


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 62-63.

researched using abundant primary sources, there is a glaring problem. What arguably holds it back from being considered the best history of Coughlin written are not the facts presented or the validity of the history but rather the author’s emotional tone. This is the first history written of Coughlin since the 1940s in which the author’s viewpoint of Coughlin lacks unjustified objectivity. The author’s feelings are clear even in the title of the book. The way that the book is written makes the reader wonder if Warren selected information to fit his viewpoint, for example, the personal accounts he selects and the information he presents in regards to Coughlin and the Ku Klux Klan, a topic explored further. His overview of Coughlin’s local life is also fairly negative, and he even argues that the local community is dedicated to forgetting his memory, a statement debunked in later chapters of this thesis. His goal in his biographical account appears to be to highlight the atrocities of the “father of hate radio” rather than present all the facts. While the book is a great history of the priest, the author’s approach and view hinders it from being the best.

In 1998, two books about the cleric were published: *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* by Ronald H. Carpenter and *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* by Michael Kazin. Carpenter’s account is less of a history and more of a rhetorical analysis. The author assesses oratorical factors that contributed to Father Coughlin’s public speaking career and critically analyzes the priest’s way of speaking using six key speeches made by Coughlin during the height of his popularity from 1931 to 1936. Carpenter provides a new way to evaluate Father Coughlin and his life in the public sector and attempts to conclude through his analysis why Coughlin was so popular. Kazin’s account, first published in 1995 but published in its entirety in 1998, is tucked within a larger book on the rise of populism in the United States. Not surprisingly, the account of Coughlin is centered on his involvement with this
movement. Kazin claims that “Coughlin was a new kind of evangelical populist” and paints the priest as a determined, powerful, but also radical leader for the Populist Party. The author finds the cleric bizarre but fascinating and claims “Coughlin’s mistake was to preach a bigoted and premature anticommunism when most Americans still cared more about the value of their labor.” While both of these accounts are very different in nature showcasing varying faucets or aspects of Coughlin’s life, they both attempt to present their facts while not presenting either a negative or positive opinion of the priest, unlike Warren.

The books produced in the 1990s broadened the range of historical inquiry into the life of Coughlin. Two were analytical, breaking down speeches of the priest to better understand grander connections or ways of speaking. Another traced the entirety of Coughlin’s life but lacked objectivity when presenting the facts, and the final account traced Coughlin’s political connections with the Populist Party. Since then no new books have been written. Two articles have surfaced within four years of each other: “Condemning the Nazis’ ‘Kristallnacht’: Father Maurice Sheehy, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the Dissent of Father Charles Coughlin” in 2008 by Maria Mazzanga and “The Priest and the President: Father Coughlin, FDR, and 1930s America” in 2012 by Glen Jeansonne. Mazzanga’s piece examines how the Catholic Church in the United States responded to the plight of the Jewish population during World War II. Coughlin is just one of a few persons of interest in the article, and it, not surprisingly, touches upon his anti-Semitic position. Jeansonne’s account is simply “an overview of Coughlin's career” that, in turn, “provides insights into the role of religion in America and the combustible combination of religion and politics.”

---

47 Ibid., 133.
books before it, mostly traces Coughlin’s relationship with the president. Like some of the few articles published throughout the decades on Coughlin, much of the information presented in these two 21st century articles is covered in the books written about him or his life. While their discussion of the topic is unique, the information presented is not.

After assessing all these histories of Father Charles E. Coughlin, it is clear why he would be viewed quite negatively. With all his vulgar comments and extreme behavior outlined briefly in the previous pages, one understands why he became nationally infamous. Coughlin’s rhetoric invited attacks, and he was even constantly critiqued by the Catholic community, which would also later end his reign as radio host. In Coughlin’s own Social Justice, many of these critiques were published, which, interestingly enough, also proves how little he cared about the national opinion if he printed their criticism in his periodical. In an early 1936 issue, a review was published by a Baltimore priest stating that Coughlin needed to “avoid journalism pitfall” and criticized him for his use of a cartoon claiming it to be “crude, undignified, and cheap.”49 However, as history knows, Coughlin did not follow that priest’s advice.

CHAPTER TWO: FROM YOUNG PASTOR TO RADIO BROADCASTER: THE EARLY YEARS OF FATHER COUGHLIN

What is evident from all the histories written about Coughlin is that there is a lack of research conducted on the radio priest in his local community. With all the attention he garnered on a national scale, it was hard for historians to look beyond the fierce words the radio priest delivered in the mid to late 1930s. As stated, this project examines Coughlin’s local history that has been fairly ignored for three fourths of a century. This begins with examining Father Coughlin’s rise to fame in his earliest days in Michigan.

In a few short years, the young Canadian priest was able to build a major landmark in the area attracting more and more Catholics to the community while also attempting to make the area better for existing Catholics. Yet in the eyes of the many members of the Royal Oak community, Coughlin’s greatest achievement in his early years was making the area safer by muting the power of the Ku Klux Klan. While the details of his interactions with the Klan are disputed, what can be gathered from the stories concerning Coughlin and the Klan is that numerous members of the community clearly viewed the silencing of the Klan as a triumph for the radio priest. The chapter also concludes by briefly examining some of the radio sermons Coughlin produced and the rhetoric used by the priest during his rise to both local and national fame. One of the best ways to fully comprehend how the priest could attract such a strong reaction from a local audience is also accessing how he garnered national attention.

The Beginning

Charles Coughlin was born in Hamilton, Ontario on October 25, 1891. He began his schooling at St. Mary’s Catholic School in Hamilton and eventually made his way to St.

Michael’s College of the University of Toronto.\(^2\) At the university, he received an honors degree in philosophy at the age of twenty in the year 1911. After graduation, he struggled with various career choices but eventually began a career in the priesthood deciding to enter the Basilian novitiate at St. Michael’s.\(^3\) After he was ordained in 1916, Coughlin began teaching at Assumption College in Windsor, but in 1918, there was a policy change. Such change would now require Coughlin to become a full member of his order, the Basilians, or join a congregation. Coughlin decided to commit to the latter and moved just across the border to Detroit, Michigan.\(^4\) In metro-Detroit and Kalamazoo, Coughlin assisted as a young priest in various parishes. Finally, in 1923, Coughlin was formally incardinated into the diocese of Detroit, and he worked in several parishes around the Detroit metropolitan area.

During his time in the various parishes around Detroit, Coughlin started to attract a following. He was a talented orator, and many Catholics around the area would overflow the churches in order to hear his homilies. This caused a small resentment among some of the other priests, but the Archbishop of Detroit, Bishop Michael James Gallagher, retained much respect for Coughlin and was very proud of the young priest. This led Gallagher to assign Coughlin to the small town of Royal Oak, just a few miles north of the Detroit border, where he was to start a new Catholic parish in 1926.\(^5\) The region was mostly Protestant and remained that way in the first few years of the parish’s existence. Protestants in the area also harbored a strong tradition of anti-Catholicism, which was present in such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan addressed later in this chapter.\(^6\)

---


\(^3\) Ibid., 2.


This new parish was to be dedicated to St. Therese of Lisieux, also known as St. Therese of the Little Flower. This young saint had just been canonized in Rome in 1925, and the National Shrine in Royal Oak is still the only national shrine and basilica built in her honor in the United States. Yet the church, first known as Little Flower, did not begin as the massive basilica that it is today. On June 27, 1926, the church held its first mass and was officially consecrated by the archbishop of Detroit, Bishop Michael Gallagher, later that afternoon. It began as a wooden structure that was even too big for the few families who had committed their loyalties to the church. It was described in *The Daily Tribune* as “a more or less temporary building to serve the purpose until an imposing stone structure is erected.” Yet, it is also described as “completely equipped and beautifully decorated. Comfortable seats are supplied to seat 600 people easily.” However, at the parish’s opening, there were only twenty five to twenty eight families who joined the new church. Yet, increase in participation was promising due to continued growth of the area. It was quite evident that the Royal Oak area was going to continue to grow quickly because the booming auto industry of the 1920s in Detroit was pushing people north to the now accessible and desirable suburbs outside of the overcrowded city.

Although it would be just over ten years before the church would be, for the most part, entirely complete, Coughlin was already beginning to become an important and well-established member in the community. Starting a new church in this community was already endearing

---

7 Ibid.
Coughlin to many members of the community despite its numerous anti-Catholic members. By looking at records of Coughlin’s parish, it is evident how much he did for the community and why he would be so well adored and respected by many. Foremost, Coughlin facilitated the creation of the first Catholic Church in the community, helping to construct it into the national shrine that it is today. As stated previously, in 1926, a wooden church was built to house six hundred parishioners; however, the church had to be moved in order to accommodate the tower and the narthex that was finished in 1931. Construction continued on until 1937 with a convent being added to the property, an alter built housing holy relics of St. Timothy, St. Theophilus, and St. Therese, a blessed sacraments chapel built housing holy relics of St. Cecelia and St. Agnes, and a stations of the cross added to the church. At the end of construction, the church itself could hold over three thousand parishioners and was now over five times the size of the original church. The construction of the church was also estimated to cost between $750,000 and $850,000, a hefty sum at the time.

14 Ibid.
15 The original concept for the church and the Charity Cross Tower that Father Coughlin would eventually broadcast out of was envisioned by Talbot Hamlin, a well-known early 20th century architect who taught at Columbia University. While few architectural projects are attributed to this designer, according to a letter written by a PHD candidate from Cornell University in 1981, this idea of the church, especially the famous 104 Charity Crucifixion Tower, was of his making, although he was not properly cited for its creation. See “Peter Kanfruan Letter to Royal Oak Historical Society,” November 3, 1981. However, Ruth Mugglebee, author of Father Coughlin of the Shrine of the Little Flower: An Account of the Life, Work and Message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin, attributes another architect with the project, Henry McGill. See Ruth Mugglebee, Father Coughlin of the Shrine of the Little Flower: An Account of the Life, Work, and Message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1933), 172. Although there appears to be some disagreement here, a little research uncovers that McGill worked for the firm McGill and Tamlin, which one can assume both parties created. See Barbara K. Randau, Owen A. Perkins, Karen A. Crawford, Ruth G. Cleaveland, Lois A. Lance, and William J. Sullivan, Royal Oak Images: Yesterday’s Charm Today’s Treasures (Elk Rapids: Bookability Inc., 2006), 154. It appears that Tamlin was just not given the credit he deserved in the accounts of Father Coughlin.
17 Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, National Shrine of the Little Flower Historical Timeline, November 17, 2005.
Although the church that Coughlin created was, in itself, a remarkable contribution to the community, during its construction he was also focused on helping other aspects of the community. During the construction, he started his radio show on October 17, 1926 in the soon-to-be old church and published magazines such as *Shower of the Rose* and his famous periodical *Social Justice* that emerged in 1936. Although Coughlin’s radio show would eventually contribute to his downfall, it began as a way to help generate money for the parish. Preaching over the air was just another way, in the beginning, to help his community. Also, the radio show that Coughlin first began was not the radio show for he is most known. His first radio show was directed towards the youth in the community, a group Coughlin was always passionate about helping. The radio priest, in a 1970 interview, claims the show to have been “a series of catechism classes known as *The Children’s Hour*, and it was formulated that it would appeal to all Christian children particularly and non-Christian.” The program became attractive to adult audiences as well, and it sparked his next radio show that followed closely on the heels of *The Children’s Hour*. Along with the construction and the radio show, Coughlin also sheltered visitors of the church in the narthex always making sure that they had a place to stay even during its construction.

Coughlin also appeared to have reached out to big names such as Babe Ruth for financial assistance for the church and community; Ruth graced Shrine’s hallowed halls on at least one occasion on April 15, 1927, as seen on the following page. On such occasion, “The Babe” told the Shrine parishioners that morning before mass that “he did not want to hear coins hitting the

20 Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, National Shrine of the Little Flower Historical Timeline, November 17, 2005.
23 Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, National Shrine of the Little Flower Historical Timeline, November 17, 2005.
collection plate referring to only cash being offered.” 24 In the years to come, Coughlin continued to remain close friends with Ruth and the Yankees who, in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, helped collect money when the church was desperately struggling to pay its bills. Author Sheldon Marcus paints a remarkable story in which Babe Ruth took charge of the donations basket telling the priest to step back while he took over. Some estimate that the ball players helped a desperate Coughlin rake in over ten thousand dollars. 25 Some of the Detroit Tigers also followed in their footsteps during this period coming to mass on various Sundays at the unfinished church in order to give and help collect donations. 26 On one occasion, both the Detroit Tigers and the New York Yankees both attended Sunday mass helping to generate several thousand dollars. 27 While this is just a very brief history of the priest’s early years in his new parish, one can still get a sense that he was dedicated to the community. Coughlin clearly had his faults and would later fall into national infamy, but what he built in the community and its memory was significant.

26 Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, Biography of Father Coughlin from American Heritage, November 17, 2005.
Father Coughlin and Babe Ruth

Coughlin and the Ku Klux Klan

Yet while all that Coughlin did and built in his early years in Royal Oak still remains to this day, there is still a piece of Coughlin’s early years that is often forgotten or contested: Father Coughlin’s connection with the Ku Klux Klan. The short history of Coughlin and the Ku Klux Klan is discussed in a few of the accounts of Coughlin’s life, but there appears to be no consensus. While some claim his wild encounters with the Klan to be true, others state that the facts do not line up. There is a clear lack of primary documents on the subject, and the documents that can be gathered neither thoroughly falsify the story nor prove it to be true. This is due to Royal Oak’s complicated history.

The city of Royal Oak has an old and very interesting history. The town was first surveyed in 1819 and was named by the Territorial Governor of Michigan Lewis Cass. It was named for a large oak tree that he found himself sitting under one day. As the decade progressed, so did the small town. Small shops, business, and taverns began to emerge in Royal Oak during

---

its first couple of the decades along with a cemetery and eventually its first rail road in 1838. The town continued to expand as the years progressed adding libraries, factories, and many different churches. However, there was a common theme among the first churches; they were all Protestant. The first Catholic church was not built until 1868 by Edmund Loughman who donated the quarter of an acre land. Masses were only celebrated once a month in the parish of only twenty five members of mostly German and French origin since that was when a priest could be brought into the area. The priest from Centerline could not justify making trips to the church more often due to its small numbers.29

By the turn of the century, that soon would change. As industry in the Detroit area grew, so did the small city just about five miles north of Detroit. More and more people of all different backgrounds began to pour into the city since it was much more accessible. Railroads had been in the area for a few decades, but it was the creation of the automobile that really made venturing to Royal Oak so much easier. On January 6, 1914, Henry Ford announced that he would pay his workforce a minimum wage of five dollars per eight hour work day. This caused thousands of people to move to Detroit in search of work in the booming auto industry.30 Not surprisingly, Detroit became overcrowded, which pushed population north to the suburbs. This is how the small countryside town of Royal Oak eventually became a busy city.31

What brought them north to Royal Oak was the first paved road ever built in the United States that ran from Pontiac, Michigan all the way to Detroit: Woodward Avenue. Eventually, Coughlin would build his church and both schools along this roadway. The creation of the first bus line in 1919 also helped with transportation, and Royal Oak’s first steel waterline was built

30 Ibid.
in 1925 pulling water from Detroit to Royal Oak making the residents more comfortable.\(^{32}\) In just a few decades, the population went from 468 in 1900 to 1,071 in 1910 to 6,007 in 1920 to eventually 25,087 by 1940.\(^{33}\) On June 21, 1921, Royal Oak became an official city. On November 8\(^{th}\), they elected their first government.\(^{34}\) However, even with this influx of people by 1926, when Coughlin’s new parish was beginning, the Catholic population had not yet increased too dramatically. The region remained mostly Protestant in the first few years of the parish’s existence as well as harbored a strong tradition of anti-Catholicism.\(^{35}\) Author Alan Brinkley accurately describes the social situation as “older residents of the community, fearful of urban, industrial encroachments and hostile to immigrants and Catholics.”\(^{36}\) With this being said, it is not surprising that the Ku Klux Klan had a strong foothold in the community, as it did in other parts of the Midwest.\(^{37}\)

In the early 1920s, the Klan was at its peak in the Detroit metro-area and most of the Midwest. The Klan painted itself as a “flamboyantly mysterious fraternity”\(^{38}\) and strived to make itself appear exclusive. Although towns such as Berkley and Clawson, Michigan, two cities directly adjacent to Royal Oak, appear to have a strong written history of their connection with the Ku Klux Klan, there are few mentions of the Royal Oak’s connection with the organization

\(^{32}\) “Dates in Royal Oak History,” The Royal Oak Historical Society, http://www.royaloakhistoricalsociety.com/timeline.html. However, according to the Daily Tribune, water did not begin to flow into Royal Oak from Detroit until May 6, 1929. While the pipes may have been built, the water was not available to the general public until then. Even then, the residents of Royal Oak were encouraged to boil it for 24 hours before drinking it. See “Detroit Water Now Being Used in Royal Oak,” The Daily Tribune, May 6, 1929.


\(^{34}\) Owen A. Perkins, Royal Oak, Michigan: The Early Years (Royal Oak: Golden Jubilee Publication, 1971), 223.


\(^{37}\) See Michael E. Brooks, The Ku Klux Klan in Wood County Ohio (Charleston: The History Press, 2014) for another example of the Klan’s involvement in a small Midwest county.

other than their brief encounter with Coughlin. Such mentions include a nuptial of a Klan
member in the early 1920s and a few gatherings on holidays such as Labor Day, Memorial Day,
and Independence Day.39

Of the histories written about Father Coughlin, a fairly developed account of Coughlin’s
relationship with the Ku Klux Klan is only noted in four. Charles Tull provides the fewest details
regarding Coughlin’s connection to the Klan, stating that the biggest challenges the priest faced
in his first few years were the lack of finances for the church and “the hostility he had
encountered from the Ku Klux Klan as evidenced by their burning a cross on the lawn of his
church.”40 Sheldon Marcus goes into a little more detail stating that when the cross was burned
on the lawn just two weeks after the church was erected, a sign accompanied it reading “Move
from Royal Oak.”41 Marcus relents that the priest remained worried about the Klan but also
determined to continue to build his church. However, in a strange turn of events, Coughlin was
able to quell the hostility. According the Marcus, in May of 1927, a Ku Klux Klan funeral
procession moved down Woodward Avenue past the church towards Roseland Park Cemetery, a
cemetery that still remains almost directly across from the church to this day. In the pouring rain
Coughlin ran outside, decided to walk at the head of the procession, and then proceeded to
conduct the memorial service. After that day there was no longer a problem with Coughlin and
the Ku Klux Klan.42 To the author the story seemed strange and somewhat implausible, but the
testimony had come straight from an interview with Coughlin. Whether the story is factual or
not, the citizens of Royal Oak noticed their priest had negated the threat from the Klan and began
to attribute their lack of presence in the community to Coughlin.

39 Ibid., 166, 188.
41 Sheldon Marcus, Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower, (New York: Little,
42 Ibid., 28-29.
Author Alan Brinkley describes the cross burning similarly to Marcus’s account stating, “Early in July 1926, a late-night telephone call summoned him to his newly completed church, where he found a blazing cross planted on the lawn- a warning from the Ku Klux Klan.”

However, Brinkley describes how Coughlin ended the presence of the Klan in the Royal Oak area a little differently. In the years to come, Coughlin, mostly unknowingly, heavily increased the Catholic population of Royal Oak and silenced the Klan during the church’s construction. According to Alan Brinkley, Father Coughlin not only helped generate hundreds of new parishioners but also new Catholic residents to Royal Oak. It was no longer just the growing auto industry bringing people to Royal Oak; it was also “the town’s vibrant and prestigious church.”

The community became so heavily populated in the late 1920s that they began to reduce the influence of the Protestants and the Ku Klux Klan in the community. In the eyes of the Catholic community, Coughlin’s presence stopped the persecution. Again, according to Brinkley, “an increasing number [of] new Catholic residents of Royal Oak, attracted there by the town’s vibrant and prestigious church and settling in such numbers that the Ku Klux Klan could no longer terrorize the community.”

Donald Warren retains the most pessimistic view of burning of the cross story stating that it likely did not even happen. He also remarks that Marcus’s story is mostly likely false since there are no records of this story in any Klan records. Warren even makes the claim that there were possibly not even any anti-Catholic sentiments in the area since there appeared to be no problems with the Klan in Berkley where there was a major Klan population, and there was already a Catholic church in Royal Oak, St. Mary’s parish. All the evidence he could gather

---

44 Ibid., 91.
45 Ibid., 93.
about the supposed burning cross pointed to the story being fiction. He could not find an article written on the event, and the supposed cross had no burn marks. The author believed that all the theatrics were a ploy to gain more money for the parish in its struggling times. However, in 2011, JoEllen McNergney Vinyard published *Right in Michigan’s Grassroots: From the KKK to the Michigan Militia*. Vinyard claims the story to be true using Klan records and even stated that in 1923, St. Mary’s parish also suffered attacks from the Klan with crosses being burned on their lawn as well proving Warren’s assumptions to be false. The author also seems to attribute the decline of the Klan with the increasing amount of Catholics in the area.

In an interesting twist of fate, the Royal Oak Historical Society may have one of the crosses meant to be burned on the lawn of Coughlin’s church. Years ago, Royal Oak historian Lois Lance brought in a large cross wrapped in newspaper, pictured on a following page. The cross stood at least 5 feet high and was said to belong to a member of the Ku Klux Klan who wanted to burn it on the lawn of a Catholic church. It was said to have been taken off the lawn of Shrine before it was burned. When the Royal Oak Historical Society opened up the packaging around the cross, it reeked of lighter fluid indicating that was meant to be burned. Yet, its intended target cannot be confirmed. In an article printed in the first decade of the millennium in *The Daily Tribune*, the head of the Royal Oak Historical Society mentioned the cross burning story and the shock of one visitor coming crossing a photo of “a cross burning on a white man’s lawn.” The photo was of Father Coughlin extinguishing the fire on a burning cross with frightened parishioners in the backdrop, as seen on a following page

48 Second Interview, January 28, 2016.
49 Muriel Versagi, *The Daily Tribune*, 2000s
remain a mystery. No original article could be located that was attributed to the picture, and no one could locate the original picture. The despite the pictorial evidence, the full truth behind burning still remains a mystery.

*Original photo of possible Ku Klux Klan Cross* 

---

50 The Royal Oak Historical Society Ku Klux Klan Cross
In the end, with every great tale there is probably a middle ground. Whether the cross burning was a tale from another area in Michigan or the story did occur but on a much smaller scale, one will never know all the true details. Yet what is important about this story, and even the story mentioned by Marcus, is the image that Coughlin made for himself. The fact that the cross burning story is still remembered today and helped booster Coughlin’s fame in the community is what matters in this context. The Catholics and others in the Royal Oak community saw this story as a triumph, which is clear from the reception Coughlin received and the number of people who moved into the community and eventually joined the parish. Whether the story is true, false, or exaggerated, the Catholic community felt safe enough to expand in bounds seeing Coughlin as their hero. With all his accomplishments, this new parish priest was quickly becoming the most popular man in the community.

---

From Local Idol to National Personality

Although Coughlin was clearly on the fast track of becoming a local legend, it is his national fame that is often remembered. Many wonder, how could a local metro-Detroit priest with just a weekly radio show attract an audience from all over the country? The answer is simple; the same way he became so attractive to his community in the first place. Coughlin was a brilliant orator and produced homilies to which the people of his community could easily relate. His rhetoric spoke to the common people, and he had a way of persuading the masses to accept his way of thinking. While Coughlin could not captivate and garner respect in his community based on his speeches and even publications alone, it is what drew them to him initially. The same can be said for his national listeners. Although a majority of his listeners had abandoned him by the turn of the decade, his skills as a public speaker garnered a large crowd. In a short period of time Coughlin would transform from just a local idol into also a national personality. By examining the broadcasts fashioned in the early years of the 1930s, it is evident why both the local and national audiences were captivated by Coughlin.

Early broadcasts of Coughlin were simple with pleasing and powerful messages. For example, between 1931 and 1932, Coughlin broadcasted “twenty seven weeks dedicated to Jesus Christ and the principles that He taught; twenty seven weeks devoted to the people of the United States irrespective of creed or race insofar as we are all brothers and sisters of our Divine Master.”52 With the majority of the United States being of Christian faith and the emergence of the worst economic depression the country had ever faced, weekly sermons dedicated to both faith and the struggling masses appealed to wide audiences. Furthermore, Coughlin’s messages attracted a population attempting to appeal the eighteenth amendment and legalize alcohol once

again. Coughlin, like many Americans, believed that it should be an individual’s right to drink alcohol and maintain temperance and abstinent on their own terms. While he claimed “the Catholic Church abhors drunkenness,” his belief was that control should be given to the individual, not the government. With millions of Americans losing more and more individual freedoms each day due to the depression, Coughlin’s sermon could be seen as welcoming to the public on many levels. In a following broadcast titled “The Un-Christian Origin of Prohibition,” Coughlin even claims it is un-Christian and un-American to be for prohibition since both Jesus and the Founding Fathers drank. He pleaded to his audience, both Catholics and Protestants, to just open their Bible to see the truth.

The following year Coughlin produced a number of radio shows titled *The New Deal in Money*. The twenty-five week program was “predicated upon the hope there is still freedom of the printed work and of the spoken word.” Again, Coughlin appealed to his listeners’ belief in the rights of citizens. Furthermore, Coughlin focused these broadcasts on what caused the Great Depression, how to fix the problems that have developed, and what had already been done. Coughlin put a lot of blame for the current state of the country on bankers and the Treasury Department who refused “to face the local debt question.” Coughlin, in these broadcasts, proceeded to call for a higher wage for industrial workers and laborers, such as the Detroit auto workers. With a workforce desperate for money and a place to put blame, Coughlin seemed like a man of reason to many.

---

53 Ibid., 29-30.
54 Ibid., 35.
56 Ibid., 9.
57 Ibid., 13.
58 Ibid., 127.
However, few were not entirely swayed. James P. Warburg, Vice-Chairman of the Bank of the Manhattan Company, was angered by the attacks Coughlin unleashed on bankers and on Warburg personally. He was so upset that he sent two detailed letters to Coughlin in January: “Open Letter to Rev. Charles E. Coughlin” and “Reply to Rev. Charles E. Coughlin.” The first challenged Coughlin’s assumptions about him, other bankers, and members of Wall Street as well as the government’s financial role. The following Sunday Coughlin addressed Warburg’s concerns but claimed he could not be converted to his way of thinking. He did, however, stated Warburg to be of “good character as an individual.” Yet, this was not enough for the banker since his second letter continued his concerns about Coughlin’s way of thinking. It may seem puzzling to some why an executive would be so concerned with a radio broadcast of a parish priest, but the answer is simple. Coughlin was commanding a large audience and was only gathering more and more followers each week. The radio priest proved a great threat to all those who considered him an enemy in the early 1930s. He spoke for the people, and many Americans stood by him.

In March of 1934, Coughlin continued lecturing about the injustices occurring in the country and the exploited people of the United States. He stated “Democracy had not failed. But the citizenry – you and I and our neighbors – have failed partly due to our disinterestedness; and mostly due to the greed and cunning of our exploiters.” The radio priest’s sermon echoed some of the same themes as the previous broadcasts such as distrust in bankers, a need to revitalize the way currency is handled, and the desire to change the way laborers were treated and paid. However, this broadcast seemed to be more directed towards changing the government as well as supporting the new president, Franklin Roosevelt. He claimed that Roosevelt had pledged

himself to the program of restoring the United States.\textsuperscript{61} With the country falling further into the depression, the people of the United States were calling for drastic and immediate changes, just like Coughlin.

The following year Coughlin dedicated a series of lectures to social justice which resounded many of the same issues as the previous years’ broadcasts. However, in the eyes of Coughlin, it appeared that the government was on its way to fixing the United States through the New Deal, and many of the citizens were gaining more rights. The radio priest even stated that “today the American people are the judges and jury who will support this Administration and accord it to a sportsman’s chance to make good.”\textsuperscript{62} Yet fair wages for the industrialists and laborers as well as the unemployment were still major concerns.\textsuperscript{63} Coughlin also highlighted what he believed were principles of social justice, which included private ownership of property and abolition of privately owned banks, values that the average American citizen found inviting.\textsuperscript{64}

By the end of 1935, Coughlin’s tone began to change and became more severe. The radio priest began to lose some hope in the American government and Roosevelt, and as stated in the previous chapter, by the end of the year, Coughlin had turned on the president.\textsuperscript{65} In 1936 he published \textit{Money! Questions and Answers} which was dedicated “to the oppressed people of America.”\textsuperscript{66} The book was created to help the people of the United States better understand how to use their money, and the book was written in question and answer form. While much of the

\textsuperscript{61} Charles Coughlin, \textit{Lecture: The Ultimate Aim} (Detroit: The Radio League of the Little Flower, 1934).
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 8, 12.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 17-18.
\textsuperscript{65} Charles J. Tull, \textit{Father Coughlin and the New Deal} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 103.
\textsuperscript{66} Charles Coughlin, \textit{Money! Questions and Answers} (Royal Oak, National Union for Social Justice, 1936, 6.
public may have viewed it as condescending, it appeared as if Coughlin was trying to provide a service that he believed the government could and would not provide its citizens.

At the same time, the radio priest had forgone his admiration for the president, it seemed that Coughlin also began his anti-communism rants;\(^\text{67}\) attacking the Jewish population did not frequent his broadcasts until the late 1930s, mostly in 1937 and 1938, as evidenced by a book of his sermons titled *Am I an Anti-Semite*. However, while he did directly attack certain Jewish groups, it was their supposed connections with Communism that caused him to make such drastic accusations and expel extreme words.\(^\text{68}\) In the years to follow, due to his change in attitude, most of his national audience would turn off their radios and condemn the words of their once favorite radio priest. However, his local community was not as soon to forget his earlier broadcasts since they witnessed Coughlin’s commitment to their community. In the following chapter, the deeds of the famous parish priest and the local community’s response will become clearer.


CHAPTER THREE: IN ALL HIS GLORY: THE LOCAL COMMUNITY’S RESPONSE TO FATHER COUGHLIN

In a few short years Father Coughlin went from a local icon to a national personality. His radio shows reached audiences throughout the world, and he even traveled at times on political escapades, for example, to events involving his National Union for Social Justice, trying to further his interests. However, his primary interests, it appeared, were his beloved Shrine, his growing schools, and his local flock. After the completion of the National Shrine of the Little Flower in the mid-1930s, the number of parishioners continued to grow. In fact, numbers grew despite the growing intolerance Coughlin expressed in his radio shows and in his periodical. At its founding there were only, at the most, twenty eight families that were a part of the church.1 By 1942, the parish had increased to five hundred families, the same year Coughlin’s periodical ended publication and two years after his radio show was taken off air; this demonstrated how devoted the community was to him even in his most difficult days. By 1950, the parish had increased to fifteen hundred families, and by the time he retired in 1966, there were over three thousand families in the church.2 It seemed that as the population of Royal Oak continued to grow throughout the city, the parish did as well. Today the parish still has over four thousand dedicated families.

In 1934, Father Coughlin and his parish opened Shrine Grade School. Five years later it was moved to its current location at 12 Mile and Woodward in the heart of Royal Oak. Just one mile north, on 1941, the Shrine of the Little Flower Girl’s Academy opened as well. The following year, thirteen young women graduated from the school. Just three years later in 1945, the school was renamed Shrine Catholic High School when men were allowed to attend after

---

1 Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, National Shrine of the Little Flower Historical Timeline, November 17, 2005.
2 Ibid.
Coughlin abandoned his plan to create an all-boys high school. As impressive as Coughlin’s accomplishments were in regards to opening the schools in such a short time and reshaping the education of the community, what is even more incredible is the community’s response. Despite all the negatives attached to Father Coughlin and many other Catholic school options in the metro-Detroit area, such as St. Mary’s Catholic School in Royal Oak, the community still respected him and his parish by sending their students to the schools. In 1962, just four years before Coughlin retired, the grade school alone had over 1,665 students, the most in Shrine history, proving how he and his church was viewed locally.³

As evidenced by the growing number of parishioners and students in the height of Coughlin’s career and eventual fall from grace, he never abandoned the community, and, for the most part, they did not abandon him. In their eyes, Coughlin served them well and reflected the same values they possessed. The following chapter examines briefly the people of Royal Oak and the local Coughlin, mostly focusing on the 1930s. It argues that as the radio priest continued to be present, active, and contribute to the community, it kept the people of Royal Oak loyal to him and his parish. In addition, since he was so loved and respected, the local community had difficulty addressing his controversial national messages. It also appeared that his highly conservative or even arguably quasi-fascist ideology highlighted in the previous chapter may have caused some members of the conservative community to respect Coughlin even more. What is certain, however, is that even in his darkest years, the community responded well to its priest.

*Coughlin’s Community: The People of Royal Oak*

Unlike their famous priest, the people of Royal Oak have not been the focus of much historical research. The few books that have been published on Royal Oak tend to focus on main public figures from the area, like Father Coughlin, the major landmarks, or the founding of the

³ Ibid.
town through the early 1900s. There is a lack of research on the people of the city including their feelings, family life, and their major concerns. In the period studied in this thesis, *The Daily Tribune*, the city’s news publication, focused most of its articles on national events and city disasters, although their famous hometown priest often made the papers. In 1926, several local tragedies made the front the page including a civil appeals case, a woman claiming her husband tried to kill her, and two road accidents. During the decade, car crashes and car related disasters frequented the front page. In the 1930s, more tragic stories made the *Tribune*. In 1936, a school child was killed on Northwood road in an auto accident. The following year, a slaying of a state trooper and a local robbery was noted. Needless to say, there appeared to be a theme. Other than Father Coughlin, one of the major local subjects of note during the mid-1920s through the 1930s was the city’s new water system from Detroit, as addressed in the previous chapter. The fears and joys of the experiment were expressed throughout several articles. Other than criminal or death reports and national news, Father Coughlin clearly stood out as one of the most frequently addressed topics.

In the limited literature constructed on Royal Oak past the 1920s, Father Coughlin remains a topic of interest. In *Images of America: Royal Oak*, a book capturing the progress of Royal Oak from the late 1800s through the present, Coughlin’s journey to create the Shrine is documented. To the people of Royal Oak, Shrine is considered one of the crowning jewels of the city characterized as “a pilgrimage for the faithful, while roadside motels and restaurants along Woodward Avenue sprang up to accommodate the masses.” Although the book does not describe

---

the casual citizen of the 1930s and 1940s in Royal Oak, it appears as if many of them were part of the ultraconservative right movement, a phrase used in the description of Coughlin, or even possibly more accurately, populists, based on their appreciation and fondness for the priest. Yet it appears that not all community members favored the priest. According to the source, “in March 1933, Father Coughlin made a radio attack on the bankers of Detroit. Early the next morning, a black powder bomb exploded in the basement of his home, spoiling a pile of canned goods and shaking Father Coughlin out of bed. A police guard was then sent to protect Coughlin and his home.”

Constance Kincan Crossman’s book *Royal Oak Our Living Legend 1787-1940*, while not mentioning much on the life of the people of Royal Oak in the 1920s and 1930s, describes what some of the community did to pass the time. Although work was a main priority, with many residents working for the Ford Motor Company, during the winter months skating and tobogganing were frequent pastimes. Christmas was the highlight of the season with religious values being very important to the community, hence why one of the reasons Coughlin’s Shrine was so popular. Spring, summer, and fall activities involved roller skating, carnivals, and other outside festivities. Weddings were also quite popular during this time as well as picnics and other celebrations. The main cultural feature of the city was the cinema built in 1914. Before its creation, musical concerts and shows dominated.

David G. Penney and Lois A. Lance also compiled a small history of Royal Oak including essays written by people in the area, most reflecting on times before or after Coughlin. However, one such essay, which was in fact a poem by Owen C. Perkins written for the 47th

---

9 Ibid., 44.
Annual Dinner at the Royal Oak Historical Society, mentions the priest and his flock. He recounts the events that shaped the town and the people’s reaction to such events. During the 1920s and through the 1940s, it appeared that the Royal Oak citizens were very impressed by how fast their city was growing and all the people who began to move into and expand the city, such as Father Coughlin.¹¹

Michael Kazin in *The Populist Persuasion*, possibly unknowingly, points to another reason that the Royal Oak community approved of, supported, and even justified Coughlin and the rhetoric in his broadcasts for so many years. According to Kazin, “Since the late nineteenth century, most American anti-Semites had, like Coughlin, identified Jew as both nonproductive manipulators of ‘other people’s money’ and the carriers of decadent, radical doctrines from abroad.”¹² Was much of the community anti-Semitic like Coughlin supporting his views on money lenders? While this is impossible to confirm, their toleration and even support for the priest tends to point to that conclusion, although anti-Semitism was more common among Protestants than Catholics in the 20th century.

**Building the Community**

What is clear from the little information provided on the Royal Oak community from the 1920s through the early 1940s is that their views were most likely in line with Father Coughlin’s, and they were quite interested in their famous priest. Yet what was arguably more impressive in the eyes of the community than Coughlin was what he built in the community. During the course of Coughlin’s tenure in the National Shrine of the Little Flower, the “radio priest” contributed much more to the community than managing the church and the two Catholic schools. However,

---


the parish was the focus and the reason for many of the other financial projects Coughlin eventually sought. In the 1930s, the radio priest also ushered in many businesses. Warren’s account mentions “Shrine Super Service,” a gas station that had once offered the parishioners of Shrine, visitors, and tourists a convenient fill up on their way to or from the church or even just through town. However, “after World War II it had been leased to Standard Oil,” yet “it continued to earn revenue for the Shrine,” stated Warren. It might appear odd that a parish would own a gas station, but the business brought in profits for the church and provided a service to the community in the form of the expanding church as well as the gas station. Along with the large and prominent gas station sitting across from Shrine on Twelve Mile and Woodward, Coughlin opened a souvenir store and a refreshment stand. The priest also opened a block of stores during this decade to better serve the area as well as to probably generate money for the church. Each one of the endeavors provided income for the church and the neighborhood helping to grow the community by making the Shrine a regional destination.

According to one Royal Oak patron, the hotels located on Woodward between Thirteen Mile and Twelve Mile, which would position them between the church and the high school, were also owned by the parish to house visitors of the Shrine. However, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that they were part of Coughlin’s business ventures. Yet, it seems likely based on the other endeavors that he at least encouraged their creation. All of the buildings produced by Coughlin served three purposes: to generate money for the church, build up the growing community, and to attract visitors to the area, which would help supplement the first

---

14 The pictures of the business are recorded in a photo album constructed by the administrative assistant a former Royal Oak mayor, Clawson, in order to better preserve the history of Royal Oak. The photo albums were later donated to the Royal Historical Society where they are currently available to the public of viewing.
15 First Interview, January 28, 2016.
two purposes. Coughlin worked to build up the prestige of the parish in order to gather visitors from all over the country, and when they did arrive in the area, Coughlin did his best to make them comfortable. The community appeared pleased with these expansions and continued to grow.

*Original picture of the site of Coughlin’s block of stores*¹⁶

*Original photos of the businesses attributed to Shrine of the Little Flower*¹⁷

---

¹⁶ The Royal Oak Historical Society Picture Collection
¹⁷ Ibid.
A Continued Success in the Early 1930s

Although Coughlin’s enterprises were not complete until 1937, the community responded to their priest and his parish by filling his church to capacity almost every weekend. In a local newspaper article titled “Overflow Crowds Hear Priest through Amplifiers” dating back to early April 1933, the author outlines the success of Father Coughlin in the community and the community’s response to their priest’s sermons and broadcasts. In the early years of Shrine of the Little Flower, the new church generated a large audience, so large at times that the crowds overflowed the church. The in-depth article is equipped with three large pictures showcasing the massive crowd the priest garnered when broadcasting from the church. According to the article, thousands of people were “unable to crowd into the Shrine of the Little Flower Sunday heard the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin through amplifiers outside the church.” The community was so eager to hear to the priest that they crowded around the outside of the church standing outside of their cars straining their ears and doing their best to hear the radio priest over the amplifier.

The article outlines the sermon he presented, which was also that week’s radio broadcast. The broadcast was titled “The Truth Must be Told,” although the truth behind the broadcast was subjective based on the controversy his broadcasts ignited. Yet, Shrine appeared to be the only church in the area that was broadcasting some of their sermons and the only one that needed to. The church was the only area parish generating a large enough crowd and the only one with a priest who was a radio celebrity. In the beginning Coughlin was even still broadcasting to the children in the late afternoon before giving his full sermon in the evening on Sundays. The sermon/broadcast outlined some topics that concerned Coughlin such as the banks and bankers who he believed facilitated the depression, a topic that frequented his broadcasts, and issues with

---

18 “Overflow Crowds Hear Priest through Amplifiers,” Unknown Local Newspaper, April 1933.
the *Detroit Free Press*, a long time opponent of Father Coughlin. Other critics of Coughlin were also present at the outside broadcast. The radio station, WJR, a radio station still broadcasting in the metropolitan Detroit area, was so concerned that the broadcast would be interrupted by critics of the priest that they made a disclaimer at the beginning of the broadcast stating that numerous threats had come to them and if anything was “to prevent the reception of this presentation in your home, please keep your radio turned into your station for two or three minutes, even after the disturbance, until your local announcer will speak to you.”

In another section of the article, a picture was captured of Father Coughlin entering the Shrine to deliver the sermon. Due to the fear of disruption, police guarded the shrine. However, his critics remained few and far between in the crowd. If there were any present, they were easily overshadowed by his adoring fans anxiously waiting to hear their beloved pastor speak. Even the radio host stated that all week radio listeners had “been feverishly awaiting Father Coughlin’s reply to the unprecedented attack made upon him by a local newspaper [The Detroit Free Press]. This vast radio audience, I am sure, permits me to voice sympathy because of the injustice which has been perpetrated.”

While in the early 1930s many of the radio personalities were fans of Coughlin and supported him, in the years to come much of the national community would join the few critics that had emerged in 1933. However, copious attendance from the community would continue to pour into the church, viewing their priest in the same way they did in the early 1930s.

**Fanning the Flames of 1936: A Church Ablaze and Fiery Publication**

Through the rest of the decade Coughlin continued to be a success in the community. This church was always packed, and most of the community responded well to his broadcasts,

---

21 “Overflow Crowds Hear Priest through Amplifiers,” *Unknown Local Newspaper*, April 1933.
business developments, and presence in the community. With that being said, it is not surprising that the most publicized event of 1936 was of a large fire that plagued the community. The original Shrine parish was burned down to the ground on Saint Patrick’s Day, March 17, 1936. The Daily Tribune covered it extensively the day after the fire. In letters larger than the name of the newspaper read “Fire Razes Father Coughlin’s Shrine, New Church Escapes Damage in Early Morning Blaze.” Under the title included a small picture of the church and a picture of Father Coughlin. The article accompanying the large headline was very detailed and stated that “early morning fire of uncertain origin today destroyed the original Shrine of the Little Flower on Twelve-Mile road east of Woodward avenue, home of the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin’s weekly radio broadcasts for the last ten year.” Father Coughlin claimed he would much rather have that church go up in flames than his new, not fully completed church, located not too far from the scene. However, important relics such as the arm bone of St. Therese of Lisieux that was located in a safe in the church and “a piece of the true cross” went down with the flames. The article continued by addressing who first witnessed the fire and where the radio shows would continue, the famed Crucifixion Tower. While Coughlin appeared quite relieved that his new church was saved, he repeatedly stated his disappointment with the burning of his first parish.

The article appeared to be one of the largest that year, and the mysterious burning was a newsworthy event. It is not a surprise that a large scale disaster would be found on the front page of a local newspaper. However, this was not any church that went up in flames. It was Coughlin’s Shrine, as the newspaper so clearly stated. According to the article, “Since that time [1926] the name of the Royal Oak radio priest has become virtually a byword in every American home with a radio, through his weekly talks before the microphone of the sacristy.”

Coughlin was a well-known figure and clearly a popular local legend. With that being said, The Daily

---

22 “Original Wooden Church Where Priest Broadcast for Ten Years is Burned,” The Daily Tribune, March 17, 1936.
Tribune continued coverage of the cryptic burning of the Shrine for days to satisfy its curious readers who could not get enough news coverage of their beloved priest and parish.

The following a day a large picture of Father Coughlin viewing his damaged Shrine appeared on the front page. Its caption stated “The Rev. Charles E. Coughlin radio priest sees Shrine of the Little Flower being destroyed by fire of undetermined origin. Damage was estimated at $30,000. The new $750,000 shrine near completion was not touched by the fire.”23

The following day another article was published regarding the fire. The lengthy article acknowledged rumors that the Royal Oak police department was slow to putting out the fire, and the equipment being used had failed at times which would have controlled the fire quickly and more efficiently. However, the city manager and fire chief attempted to put the rumors to bed by disproving the incompetence of their staff.”24 While nothing of the fire was reported Friday or Saturday, Monday morning’s paper contained one final article on Coughlin’s parish. The article stated that a garden would be planted to outline the original Shrine building in the days to come. “Flagstone will mark the aisles, lanes of flowers will take the place of the pews and a lattice framework will mark the altar,” stated Coughlin. The article then continued to address the radio broadcast made the previous day by Coughlin and the items that were saved in the fire which would be placed in a new building to be erected soon. The column concluded by stating that Coughlin was bidding all National Union members in the area to attend a meeting on April 6th, and “Hundreds of persons took advantage of the good weather Sunday to inspect the razed Shrine.”25 The news stories of Coughlin’s torched parish ended on a happy note. Coughlin summoned a meeting in regards to what appeared to be a local chapter of a political party, and the community was gathering together to view and praise their almost completed landmark.

23 “Father Coughlin Sees His Shrine Burn to Ground,” The Daily Tribune, March 18, 1936.
24 “Fire Department’s Work at Shrine is Commended By Shafter after Inquiry,” The Daily Tribune, March 18, 1936.
While Coughlin’s first parish was in ashes, Coughlin rose to the occasion being the leader that many people in Royal Oak knew and adored.

On March 13, 1936, just four days before the fire, the radio priest also became involved in a publication, the *Social Justice*, a weekly newspaper that further broadcasted his sentiments. News of the publication was first advertised in December 1935 when Coughlin urged his radio flock to send support in the form of written letters. According to author Charles Tull, solely Father Coughlin “and his aides know what response he received to this request, but it is logical to assume that he must have obtained substantial evidence of support before venturing into so costly an enterprise as a weekly newspaper.” The expense only compounded when Coughlin announced he would not be supplementing the cost with advertisements.26

When the newspaper first emerged on newsstands it was clear that it was dominated by Coughlin. Even articles not composed by Coughlin were written by his friends. The *Social Justice* in the beginning appeared to be furthering the priest’s goals of attracting more efforts for his National Union for Social Justice with his ultimate goal to create a new political party. However, the priest continued to deny that he was trying to paint the group as a third party. In reality, the group was no more than local support leagues for Father Coughlin attempting to usher in his principles, especially in regards to social justice.27

Many of the articles in the *Social Justice* even in its first years appeared to be problematic or controversial such as heavily attacking communists and the president. For example, in one article, Coughlin claims that communism impedes some basic human rights such as being able to serve God since, according to Coughlin, communism is associated with atheism.28 In the end, Father Coughlin’s main goal was to not only undermine communism but to broadcast the

27 Ibid., 113-114.
wonders of democracy. Coughlin’s adoration for democracy is underlined in the third periodical in print in which he states, “There is no system of government any more logical or natural than is a democracy. Because it is totally dependent upon the people of both for the writing of its constitution, for the selection of men to interpret the constitution and for the election of other men to execute laws made in harmony with the constitution.”

However, not all articles were as controversial. In another article, Coughlin’s deep devotion to the cause of procuring fair wages for Detroit auto workers is highlighted. In the March 27, 1936 publication, Coughlin calls for the increase of wages for the 277,816 employees of the 102 automobile plants in Michigan. He claimed that the auto workers’ wages had been cut in the last month, and as taxes increased, he believed that their pay should increase, not decrease. The Daily Tribune also printed a similar article two years later indicating that the fight continued. In an article from January 17, 1938, Coughlin presented a proposal for what he considered to be fair and wage increases for industrial workers. He proposed “voluntary regulation of production as a means to adequate annual wages for mass production industrial workers.” Coughlin claimed that technological advancements in the last 100 years had caused mass unemployment and a decline in purchasing power. He believed his plan would benefit the workers of the Detroit metropolitan area greatly, something that would likely significantly endear the community full of auto workers to the radio priest. His devotion to his community was seemed admirable, and it is evident why his community would continue to rally behind him.

In order to further assist the goal of achieving fair wages for the members of his community, Father Coughlin started the National Union of Social Justice in 1934, which he

promoted vigorously in his periodical, and even his community, as indicated previously. In an issue printed in March of 1936, Coughlin calls the viewers to join his organization stating that, in the National Union, they can make a difference, helping farmers and autoworkers alike. He does state that they may encounter ridicule in order to try to stop their efforts of over throwing tyrannical rule, but, Coughlin claims that the singular way “they can succeed in stopping is by presenting proof that we are wrong. And that they cannot do.” Coughlin full heartedly believed that he was trying to help his community with his organization, and although the effectiveness of the organization is unclear, it appeared that at least, through his eyes, Coughlin did try to change his community for the better. For that, the community remained devoted and grateful.

A Final Goodbye and the Return of the Radio Priest: Early 1937

As evidenced by the previous news articles, Coughlin lived in the parish surrounded by adoring parishioners and community members. Yet, January 20, 1937 proved to be a difficult day for the famed radio priest and the beginning of the end of his national career since it would call for the appointment of Archbishop Mooney. On this fateful day, Coughlin’s mentor and arguably biggest supporter, Archbishop Michael Gallagher, died after falling into a coma from previously contracting influenza the week prior. A front page article in The Daily Tribune documents the life and death of Archbishop Gallagher and his connections with Royal Oak’s most famous priest. The author of the article states that “the bishop many times defended the activities of Father Coughlin, who during his many weekly broadcasts attacked the ‘changers’ whom he sought to ‘drive out of the temple.’” The column continues by addressing the fact that the radio priest verbally attacked the president, and Gallagher would continually defend his priest. Yet a statement followed saying that Coughlin apologized to Roosevelt, and Gallagher

stated “every public speaker becomes over-inspired at times.” The article thoroughly highlighted the priest’s connection with the bishop addressing that the bishop had celebrated his 40th year as a priest not too long before and that Father Coughlin had preached at the ceremonies. It concluded by acknowledging how kind and devoted Gallagher was to the metro-Detroit community and that his illness struck everyone by surprise.\footnote{United Press, “Death Takes Famed Bishop at Age 70,” The Daily Tribune, January 21, 1937.}

It appeared as if Gallagher’s connection to Coughlin was more important to the author than the actual death. Half of the article was centered on the community’s famed priest, and it appeared as if the newspaper was aware that the community would be more interested in the goings of Coughlin than the recently deceased bishop. In a column directly beneath the article on the death of the bishop was another indicating the return of Coughlin to radio after his brief absence in which he was forwarding some of his other national projects. The article states that the priest would return to the air on Sunday, which seemed to be sparked by the death of his mentor. However, Coughlin could not be reached for comments since he “denied himself all visitors” due to his distress over the loss.\footnote{United Press, “Intimates Coughlin Will Return to Air,” The Daily Tribune, January 21, 1937.} It seemed that Coughlin remained the headliner despite a seemingly more pressing story because he was who the community cared to hear the most about. This concept is furthered by articles that surfaced the following the days.

On Saturday, a large picture of Coughlin broadcasting appeared on the front page of The Daily Tribune. The caption briefly stated “Father Coughlin, famed pastor of Royal’s Oak’s Shrine of the Little Flower, return to radio broadcasting tomorrow. He is scheduled to speak over WJR from 3 to 4 p.m., and over CKLW from 8 to 8:30p.m.”\footnote{“Returns to Air,” The Daily Tribune, January 23, 1937.} A later article published in the beginning of the next week documented the radio address. The broadcast appeared to fulfill the last wishes of the archbishop who wanted Coughlin to return to the airwaves. It also appeared to
honor Gallagher who had “sponsored his [Coughlin’s] climb to fame as a radio priest.” After addressing some of the points that Coughlin made in radio broadcast regarding his fallen friend, the article concluded by stating that “the talk began a series of 52 broadcasts over a network of stations extending across the nation.”\(^37\) It is quite evident from these three follow-up articles that Coughlin was the clear focus. The community wanted to know what their famed priest would do next and if he was returning soon to the airwaves. Although the death of the bishop touched the community, Coughlin’s life appeared to matter more.

*An Enemy in the Making*

However, not everyone was a fan of Coughlin. When Archbishop Mooney was appointed to his position after the death of Gallagher in 1937, it was speculated by the Catholic community that he would not be as passive about Coughlin’s controversial broadcasts and activities as the previous bishop. Mooney, soon after being appointed Archbishop of the diocese of Detroit, attempted to dismiss all hint of possible trouble by telling the press that he was “sure Father Coughlin does not want to be an issue, and I see no reason why he should be.”\(^38\) In October of that same year, Coughlin public criticized President Roosevelt for appointing a former Ku Klux Klan member to the Supreme Court. Mooney quickly issued a public statement saying that the Archdiocese of Detroit did not condone his statement. Furthermore, Mooney chastised Coughlin for insisting that no Catholic could belong to what the priest described as a communist organization, the CIO.\(^39\) Coughlin was taken aback by Mooney and begun running some of the press statements through the new archbishop.

Although Coughlin had just resumed his role as the radio priest earlier in the year, in October of 1937, all of his fall and winter radio broadcasts were stopped. While Coughlin never


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 180-181.
confirmed it, it appeared the reason was due to the sudden backlash he encountered from Mooney. *The Daily Tribune* speculated that Mooney did not approve Coughlin’s “reply to an article in the Oct. 5 issue of the Michigan Catholic,” which upset Coughlin. His radio sermons now needed to be submitted to the Archbishop for approval.⁴⁰ Yet, despite the backlash he encountered from Mooney, he still pledged his loyalty to his church, his congregation, and to the Archdiocese in November pleading his followers to “cease their efforts to return him to the air and to remove the Shrine of the Little Flower from the Archbishop’s jurisdiction.”⁴¹ By December 7, 1937, Coughlin was scheduled to return to air after the first of the year, despite the wary Mooney. It appeared that while Mooney feared comments from Coughlin and the radio broadcasts, he feared the radio priest’s supporters in the community more. The following day it appeared that the priest had also been given approval to continue his publication, *Social Justice*, a choice that Mooney would later regret.⁴²

It seemed that Mooney was justified in his fears regarding both the radio show and later the publication. Soon Coughlin began to continue his controversial coverage by targeting the Jewish community once again. Mooney and the archdiocese were angered by Coughlin’s rhetoric and specified that his statements were not supported by the Catholic Church. Mooney even tried to appeal to the pope for help in addressing Coughlin. The pope stated he must be dealt with at a local level and would not intervene.⁴³ Until the final silencing of the radio show, Mooney and Coughlin struggled to agree on what was appropriate to express or not.

---

Coughlin’s publication remained a problem for Mooney based on its extreme content. For example, in an article from 1937, Coughlin dedicated an entire spread to a question-and-answer forum on communism that Coughlin conducted with one of his assistants at the Shrine of the Little Flower, Father Cassain. In the forum, Coughlin answered Cassian’s questions about communism claiming that Christianity and communism are two opposed schools of philosophy. One cannot be Christian and be a communist. Also, while Coughlin prized democracy, as expressed in a previous article, he did not think highly of the president. Coughlin, in an article from 1937, attacked the president’s flood policy claiming “there is more than a little reason to fear that the president is not taking the matter seriously.”

Yet, like previous issues, the Social Justice issues of 1937 addressed some direct concerns of the community. In the February 15, 1937 publication, Father Coughlin transcribed sixteen principles of social justice. All sixteen principles, with the exception of a few, demonstrate values the community would also be likely to hold. In the article, the priest called for “liberty of conscience and education, “just, living, annual wage, and labor’s right to organize.” These principles are also expressed in another publication of Social Justice concerning human rights as divine rights. The article stated that people have a right to a job, a right to an annual living wage, and a right to organize. In response to Coughlin’s concerns, the community continued to finance his publication until its removal in 1942, and they persisted to join his National Union.

In 1938, Coughlin continued to look out for the interests of the community, as noted in an article above regarding wages for industrial workers. Coughlin also spent a great deal of his time running and supporting his church during the late 1930s and even into the 1940s, conducting weddings and honoring leaving staff as well as welcoming new priests. 1939, however, appeared to be a year of activism and bold measures for the radio priest. Coughlin’s activism can be seen in an article published on the front page of the July 6, 1939 Daily Tribune. The article recounts an event that took place at the Shrine of the Little Flower hosted by Father Coughlin. The event, known as Ukrainian Day, marked the acceptance of Christianity by the Ukrainians within Ukraine and celebrated Ukrainians from all over the United States and Canada. The article states,

More than 5,000 persons attended the observance at the Shrine of the Little Flower yesterday of the 950th anniversary of the acceptance of Christianity by the Ukrainians. This followed a parade by the Ukrainians, from all parts of the United States and Canada, from 11-Mile road along Woodward avenue to the Shrine. The theme of the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin’s sermon was that the Ukrainians are destined to restore Christianity to atheistic Russia.

This article reveals much about Father Coughlin in the community. First, it showcases how active he was in the community rallying thousands from all over the community, the country, and even Canada to support the advancement of Christianity by the Ukrainians. Second, it

50 “Thousands Visit Shrine on Ukrainian Day,” The Daily Tribune, July 6, 1939.
indicates how important Coughlin and his vehement defense of traditional Catholic values was to the people of Royal Oak despite all the negative press about him on the national level since over five thousand people, one fifth of the population of Royal Oak at the time, supported Coughlin and his cause.51

On September 25, 1939, The Daily Tribune published another article on Coughlin; this time the focus was more on the bold actions of the priest rather than his pastoral or activist duties. The article dictates a radio broadcast that Coughing had made earlier in the week criticizing an embargo repeal made by President Roosevelt. The article claims that Coughlin “urged his listeners to send congressmen 10 million more letters and telegrams protesting against repeal of the arms embargo” and “accused the President of appealing to the material cupidity of Americans in his recent message to Congress and inferred that it was a reveal of his policy as cut lined at Chautauqua, N.Y., Aug. 14, 1936.”52 However, although Coughlin continually attacked President Roosevelt in the quotes in article, the author of the article does not make one negative comment about Coughlin or imply that Coughlin made a mistake in chastising the president on air. Rather, the author just simply recalls what Coughlin stated in his broadcast. The publication of this article indicates that the community found it interesting to read about the broadcasts of Coughlin and attached little criticism to them. Coughlin was important enough to be published but also respected enough not to be slandered.

While the End is Near, The Parish Remains

While throughout the rest of the decade of the 1930s the radio priest would acquire more and more critics, Coughlin and his parish would still remain a focal point in the community attracting new parishioners and visitors from around the country. In fact, by the end of the

52 “Priest Attacks Embargo Repeal,” The Daily Tribune, September 25, 1939.
decade, Coughlin and his Shrine warranted so much respect from the community that they recognized a national Shrine Day. In a September 1939 issue of *The Daily Tribune*, National Day at the Shrine is documented under a news section about the religious organizations in the community. The article states, “Sunday has been set as National Day at the Shrine of the Little Flower. Representatives from the principal cities of the East and many of the Western states will converge at the Shrine for a national celebration. Tours have been organized in New York, New Jersey, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago and Indianapolis.” 

While the article is unclear who precipitated the event, whether it was the church or community, it is certain that community was involved and broadcasting the event. Many Royal Oak residents were very proud of their church and their pastor making the effort to showcase it to the country. What this article also reflects is the attraction the church had to a national audience since tour groups from many cities were gathering to tour the Shrine. Although it is uncertain if these tour groups favored Father Coughlin, it is clear that the Royal Oak community did by helping to set a day aside to broadcast the beauty of Coughlin’s church.

Yet strong winds were beginning to blow from the south as Archbishop of Detroit Mooney and Coughlin continued to butt heads over the rhetoric of Coughlin’s broadcasts and periodicals. While Coughlin remained a faithful parish priest always respecting Mooney’s wishes, he continued to push the limit of what he was allowed to say or do. The following chapter highlights the struggles between Coughlin and his superiors, the respect that continued for him in the community, and the preservation of his memory and legacy by those in the community and what Coughlin left behind.

---

CHAPTER FOUR: THE GHOST OF ROYAL OAK REVISITED: REMEMBERING FATHER COUGHLIN

From the late 1920s through the early 1940s Coughlin was a household name, especially in American Catholic homes. Between his radio shows, his periodical, and his political aspirations, the priest could not be ignored. However, even faster than the priest rose to fame, he fell into obscurity in the eyes of most. In the late 1930s, as stated previously, his radio shows were beginning to be censored by Archbishop Edward Mooney.1 In the early 1940s, the National Association of Broadcasters also tightened its rules and limited Coughlin’s radio time. Due to the limitations placed on Coughlin, the radio priest made his last broadcast on May 12, 1940.2 However, after Coughlin’s radio show ended in May, the community appeared not convinced, patiently waiting for their priest to begin broadcasting again. The Daily Tribune published an article in September of that year to fully confirm his retirement from radio.3

However, this did not stop some from protesting Coughlin’s silencing. The priest had gathered some famous friends and dedicated national listeners in his attempts to nationalize his voice. One such friend was Edward Lodge Curran, a highly political New York City priest and president of the International Catholic Truth Society. When the New York radio shows ended Coughlin’s broadcasts, Curran began protests in order to try to change the minds of the radio station heads. However, Curran was not the only one protesting the silencing of Coughlin. One fervent listener of Coughlin, Permelia Berger, sent a letter to a Chicago station in November 1938 stating that she would boycott every product advertised on their radio station until Father

1 Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982), 266. Also of note, while Coughlin was popular among his community, he was not popular everywhere in the Detroit metropolitan area. In fact, Mooney’s endeavors would later warrant him a school named in his honor in southeastern Michigan.
3 “Father Coughlin not to Resume Broadcasts, The Daily Tribune, September, 20, 1940, Royal Oak Public Library Coughlin Collection.
Coughlin was permitted to broadcast again. Others also appeared outraged by the untimely ending of the show with one anonymous writer urging other friends of Coughlin to write to Pope Pius XI asking him to bring back the show. However, no friend or follower was successful in these pursuits.

Coughlin’s periodical, on the other hand, continued on for two more years. Coughlin, probably out of fear of being shut down by the diocese again, issued a statement about the Social Justice despite his other claims that he did not have full control over the paper:

I have made many mistakes no one appreciates more keenly that I do. I do not wish either saddle my mistakes upon the Archbishop nor do I wish to present him as condoning any ill-advised policy or error which, un-consciously, I have adopted, or I may adopt. Certainly, neither Bishop Gallagher in the present, can be on record as having approved or approving everything I have said or will say, what I have done or will do.

However, Mooney and others high ranking officials did not care that Coughlin took responsibility and attempted to shift blame away from the diocese. This periodical was causing a stir amongst the national audience, and many high ranking officials wanted it suppressed. In the spring of 1942, Coughlin’s publication was catching attention from Attorney General Francis Biddle. He was not pleased with some of the rhetoric being used in the magazine and wanted its removal from publication. Coughlin, in order to comply with the Attorney General, accepted full responsibility once again for the periodical. Yet, despite the fact that Coughlin had taken responsibility, and the magazine was temporary suspended, Biddle was not satisfied.

His best course of action, Biddle believed, was to send a distinguished Catholic layman to speak to the Archdiocese of Detroit to convince Mooney to silence Coughlin in order to stop a

---

5 “To All Friends of Father Coughlin,” Northwestern University Father Coughlin Special Collections, Box 7.
6 There is still speculation regarding if Coughlin owned the periodical or not. While most evidence points to his ownership, historians and other figures in the community are still not certain.
7 Charles J. Tull, Father Coughlin and the New Deal (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 211.
8 “Says Social Justice is Under His Control,” The Daily Tribune, April 20, 1942, Royal Oak Library Coughlin Collection.
public sedition trial that would likely occur. Mooney, despite previously being wary of alienating devote Coughlinites, full cooperated, and on May 1 he told Coughlin he must cease publication. Coughlin chose to cooperate deciding to remain an obedient Catholic priest. The information was made public on May 5th, and the press stated that the publication was suspended. A direct statement dictating that the publication had completely ceased production would likely cause the community to protest, similar to what occurred when the radio show ended. Instead, an article claimed that the publication would continue, eventually. However, Coughlin, a dutiful son of the Church, had already complied. According to one source, “Until his death a quarter-century later, he remained pastor of the Shrine of the Little Flower; his superiors forbade any attempt at a national comeback.” When Coughlin did attempt such comeback, he was forced into retirement, as addressed further on.

Coughlin, despite all these events, remained part of the parish for twenty-four more years only, for the most part, expressing some of his “milder” opinions in his homilies or in circulars. For example, on January 26, 1947, Father Coughlin printed and distributed the Shrine Herald as he did every Sunday for mass. Interestingly enough, the bulletin was printed not only for the parishioners of St. Therese of the Child Jesus Parish (a former name of the National Shrine of the Little Flower) but also the other dedicated followers of Father Coughlin who read his other publications and were therefore part of the League of the Little Flower. In this particular issue, Coughlin did what he did best; he attempted to deliver a powerful message. He began his one article titled “Too Little, Too Late” by stating, “Have you ever seen a walking corpse? I’ve seen lots of them. In America alone the must be tens of thousands of them, every one of them dead as

---

an odoriferous mackerel, yet walking around big as life.” Such death he was speaking of was the
death of souls, and Coughlin claimed that mortal sin and lack of faith were killing the souls of
thousands of people. While this article may not be as shocking as some of his broadcasts
concerning the president or the Jewish people, there appears as if he had just as much fire in his
heart after his removal from radio as he did in his prime.

However, after the early 1940s, he gave few interviews, and information within them
contradicted themselves or previous accounts. It seemed as if Coughlin felt that interviewers
were not fully understanding his message and taking his words out of context. 12 For example, he
would become upset with interviewers and journalists who painted him in a negative light.

During the late 1930s and into the 1940s, many people wrote very negative books and articles
about Coughlin highlighting his anti-Semitic rhetoric in some of his radio broadcasts. 13 While he
attempted to clarify himself at times in his own publications, he appeared to either be confused
with his own stance or could not justify himself to these writers. 14

Yet Coughlin did make news from time to time. In 1943, a postal clerk located a bomb in
a package addressed to Coughlin from a religious extremist. The following year the priest
verbally attacked England and the Soviet in regards to their war efforts, but later in the year he
would declare Stalin favorable and the one to remove communism from Russia. In 1947

Knopf, Inc., 1982), 268. Also see Sheldon Marcus, Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little
Flower, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1973). His interviews with Coughlin, along with others, showcase
these contradictions and confusion. The contradictions still puzzle scholars, which makes it hard to compose a true
history of Father Coughlin. No one knows the real truth.
13 See General Jewish Council, ed., Father Coughlin: His “Facts” and Arguments (New York: General Jewish
Council, 1939), A.B. Magil, The Real Father Coughlin (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1939), and Alfred
McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, eds, The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin’s Speeches
(New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939) for examples.
14 See Charles Coughlin, Am I and Anti-Semite?: 9 Addresses on Various “isms”: Answering the Question” (Detroit:
Condon Printing Co., 1939) as an example.
Coughlin would be involved in another monetary scandal, but it seemed to be resolved fairly quickly.\textsuperscript{15}

During these years after his fall from the national eye he tended to enjoy dining in a local eatery, Cotter’s Inn, of which he was a partial owner. According to one historian, after the end of his “reign,” he also acquired close to a million dollars in a personal bank account allowing him to live like a king the rest of his days. While the source of the money is unknown, some observers speculate that some of the money originated from his radio broadcasts, periodical, and possibly even the church funds.\textsuperscript{16} This king, however, despite his possibly oversized bank account, continued to say mass every Sunday at Shrine to between eight thousand and ten thousand parishioners, indicting that even after his fall from grace he still had a strong support from the community. He also greatly enjoyed attending sporting events, such as the Detroit Tigers, who had contributed to his churches decades before. By 1966 he celebrated his 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary as a priest.

While Mooney died on October 25, 1958, the priest’s seventy-seventh birthday, the former radio priest was still frustrating his Catholic superiors even after his official silencing in 1942.\textsuperscript{17} Most accounts and articles state he was fairly calm after his removal from the public eye, concentrating most of his attention on his school and church. Although he made some news, as expressed above, he was not of too much interest to the press, despite some of his famous connections. During John F. Kennedy’s presidential run, Coughlin became friends with Kennedys, and they attended mass at Shrine from time to time. However, after encouragement from a Kennedy associate, he did not publically endorse the soon-to-be president. Whether it was


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 296.
to protect the young Kennedy’s image or Coughlin’s, the reason behind his decision to not publically endorse Kennedy is unknown.

It was after the death of John F. Kennedy, the end of Vatican II, and the influence of the Civil Rights Movement that the traditionalist priest began to no longer accept his muted public role. Coughlin once again began to tempt the patience of the Archdiocese of Detroit. On one occasion, Coughlin carried out the orders given to him by Archbishop John Dearden in regards to the recent Vatican II changes, yet, it was clear he was bitter, and his parishioners retaliated against Dearden’s orders possibly under the encouragement of their priest. A meeting with the Archbishop at Shrine Catholic High School even ended with Dearden being assaulted by tomatoes and eggs by Coughlin supporters. In 1964, the Catholic Church also endorsed the Civil Rights Act, and every church pastor was required to read a letter of endorsement at mass. Coughlin did not do so, angering the diocese. The following Sunday he was coerced into reading the letter of endorsement, and his tone while reading the letter was clearly of someone forced to comply.

After all the changes that had recently been instituted in the dioceses, on May 26, 1966, Coughlin stated he was renouncing his silence. The papers speculated that he would soon be ousted by the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit due to this announcement and his supposed racist beliefs. Three days later, he stated he was retiring, despite claims made earlier that the diocese would not remove him from his post.\(^\text{18}\) On August 15, 1966, Father Charles Edward Coughlin reluctantly retired from his post as head of the parish of Shrine of the Little Flower after pressure from the diocese from Detroit. Although it had been about twenty five years since Coughlin had really made a national impact, the Catholic Church as a whole was still fearful of him. He had made a lot of extreme comments towards the president and the Jewish community and, even two

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 297-298.
decades after being silenced, the archdiocese did not want him to be the head of a parish. According to an interview with Sheldon Marcus, Coughlin, years after his retirement, was still bitter about the forced retirement and the church elites that made it appear that he wanted to go.

However, Coughlin did not fall into complete obscurity. He bought a house near George Romney, father of 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and continued to say mass every morning in a private chapel. In an article published in the New York Post on October 25, 1968, it appeared that Father Coughlin was attempting to publish a new two-part pamphlet titled “Helmet and the Sword.” A local newspaper also documented the publication, stating it used “colorful language.” Yet the pamphlet was not to be circulated like Social Justice due to the reception that the earlier publication had warranted by the end. The information from both parts was also going to be published in a book to follow. A year later he published Bishop Versus the Pope. The book came full circle addressing topics that Coughlin had not focused as much attention on since his early days as a radio priest, for example, birth control. However, he did incorporate his opinions on other more contemporary topics such as “the new leftists.” In 1970 he published the mostly forgotten pamphlet “Who is Dead… God or Democracy?” The self-published pamphlet seems to have only been handed to a few in the community since it begins with a letter to a dear friend, and the text was personally signed at the bottom. It also leads one to venture that it was actually his Christmas card for the season since he mentions the holiday numerous times and wishes everyone a Merry Christmas. Three years after that publication he

24 Charles Coughlin, “Who is Dead… God or Democracy?” (Bloomfield Hill, Charles E. Coughlin, 1970).
also appeared in a column for the *New York Times*. 25 In 1971, Coughlin even returned to the pulpit, preaching about the atrocities of the Nixon administration; he also praised recent developments of the church. 26 It seemed that even after being removed from head of the church he remained as busy as ever and productive, if not still an important member of the community. 27

However, some historians tend to only see Coughlin as a ghost, a sad man falling deeper into obscurity even as he reached further for the fame he once had. Kernan echoes that message in his book *The Ghost of Royal Oak*, and Warren tends to argue a similar message in the last chapter, titled the same as Kernan’s book, of his account *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio*. Kernan, who wrote his book in 1940, was not aware of what would follow in the proceeding decades; however, Warren, who wrote his account in 1996, was fully aware of the rich life Coughlin led even after his fall from national fame. While both viewed him as a ghost-like figure, it is evident even in the previous paragraphs that he was not forgotten by his community. Those loyal to him still filled the church until his retirement, and while the archdioceses of the Detroit refused to let him remain in his parish, community members still

---

27 After Coughlin retired, and even before, he had many different journalists, authors, and historians wanting to interview him, including a Philip Slomovitz who likely interviewed him in 1962. See Philip Slomovitz Letter, Northwestern University Father Coughlin Special Collections. Yet, he denied most after resignation from the airwaves and had refused everyone wanting to write a biography on him. However, on February 16, 1968, Sheldon Marcus, a PHD candidate from Fordham, attempted to contact Coughlin in order to ask him to answer some questions about his life and to supply some materials. Coughlin’s secretary, B. Buchta, responded later that month stating that Coughlin would not comply. Marcus attempted to contact him several more times without a response. Finally, on February 25, 1970, Marcus was answered by Coughlin’s secretary stating that Coughlin was out of town and would respond when he returned. On March 8, 1970, Coughlin stated that he would be home for two weeks around Easter and would be pleased to meet with him then. He then asked Marcus to send his secretary questions he would like to ask Coughlin. Marcus sent his questions, and Coughlin gave him the first interview for a biography since the early 1930s. This example proves how difficult it was for someone to gain intimate interview with Coughlin, especially outside his community where he felt comfortable. See Marcus-Coughlin Letters, Northwestern Coughlin Collection. Later that same year on September 11, 1970, Coughlin allowed journalist Eric D. Thuma to also conduct an interview, but it appears that he had less of a challenge convincing Coughlin for the interview, although Thuma does mention that few have ever been given the opportunity to personally interview the priest. This may be due to Thuma’s connection to the area, since he was from around that community, or the nature of the interview. The interview was much shorter, and the reason for the interview seems unknown. See Coughlin-Thuma Interview, September 11, 1970.
flocked to his private chapel. Even after his retirement he clearly still had loving supporters indicated by his published Christmas card.\(^{28}\) While fans of Father Coughlin did continue to dwindle throughout the years as new generations and more people moved into Royal Oak, he never became a true ghost in the community. This thesis examines Coughlin’s role in the community and their loyalty to the priest while demonstrating the necessity to assess Coughlin on a local level as well to better understand the national figure. Yet, it also validates that Coughlin’s legacy in the community has not been forgotten. His legacy, both good and bad, remained in the minds of many people in the community even after his death and still to this day. This final chapter assesses the ways in which the former radio priest still remained active in Royal Oak, was memorialized within the community, and still endures in the minds of those who lived in the community or still remain. While Coughlin may have become a ghost on a national level mostly forgotten outside his community, Coughlin is still very present in Royal Oak.

_Jubilee_

One of the greatest celebrations of Coughlin’s life in the community occurred the year he retired. In 1966 the former radio priest celebrated his fifty-year anniversary as an ordained member of the church. This was known as his Golden Jubilee, and with it came a festivity in his honor, a book of his greatest accomplishments in the community, and gold pieces created memorializing such honor. _The Detroit News_ even dedicated a large pictorial spread to the occasion.\(^{29}\) _The Daily Tribune_ also documented the event, devoting a large section to the priest. The article titled “Father Coughlin – He Built an Unburnable Cross,” mentions the great church that Coughlin created and the humility of the priest who was quoting saying, “A Golden Jubilee for an anointed priest is no occasion for the celebrant to emote with pride for any

---

\(^{28}\) Charles Coughlin, “Who is Dead… God or Democracy?” (Bloomfield Hill, Charles E. Coughlin, 1970).

accomplishment which either he or his contemporaries esteem to be of magnitudinous import.” However, the author argues that all Coughlin had built and done for the community was worthy of celebrating and more than enough reason to honor the former radio priest.30 While the accounts of his life really do not detail the merriments, the event and the book created to honor the event clearly displays the feelings of much Catholic community who claim him to be “a good, a wise, a jovial man, a great priest and a loyal American.” The book honoring his jubilee claims that one of his greatest achievements was being the first member of the clergy in the United States to have the privilege of broadcasting nationally as well internationally on their own network. It continues by indicating where in his life Coughlin was not appropriately compensated with credit and when he predicted the outcomes of history. It also states that Coughlin was taken off the radio due to anti-Coughlin propaganda, not due to any real fault of his own; however, history confirms that to be invalid, as examined previously.31 The book also commends Coughlin for being an obedient priest, even in times where he might have wanted to question his superiors’ authority. For example, the book states that Coughlin “has been submerged in a sea of silence, not because of his inability to weave words, stir hearts and access historical causes and effects, but because, with criticizing his superiors, he chose to be obedient.”32 The book concludes by wishing the pastor well and for being a grand part of history.33

As stated, a gold coin was also minted to honor Coughlin. The face of the coin reads, “Rev. Charles E. Coughlin, 1916 1966, Golden Jubilee.” On the front was also a famous picture of the priest; on the back was a picture of St. Therese which read, “Shrine of the Little Flower,

32 Ibid., 8.
33 Ibid., 13.
1926 1936, Royal Oak Michigan,” the dates representing the years from Shrine’s conception to full completion.\textsuperscript{34} While the book and the coin may not appear like particularly extravagant gifts, the fact that they celebrated such an event and produced the book and the coin prove that Coughlin and his legacy were still considered important to the community. His great successes that were always overshadowed by his unforgivable failures in the national community were highlighted for the community to read, and his face and church were venerated in a gold piece forever.

\textit{Front of Jubilee Coin}\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{34} Golden Jubilee Coin, Royal Oak Historical Society Father Coughlin Collection.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
A Death, a Funeral, and a Yearbook Dedication

Thirteen years after Coughlin’s reluctant retirement and two days after his 88th birthday, the priest died in his home on October 27, 1979. The priest had suffered from several heart attacks before he succumbed to heart failure that evening. The death of the priest was covered by numerous media outlets throughout the metro-Detroit area. The press coverage was kind highlighting many of the reasons Coughlin was so popular in his community. A Catholic newspaper, The Wanderer, claimed it did not matter if what he said was right or wrong, but rather what was important to remember was that he impacted millions in his lifetime. The Detroit Free Press, which was a fair critic of Coughlin, even praised his loyalty to his church and his

---

36 Ibid.
service.  

The Daily Tribune, not surprisingly, devoted a large spread to Coughlin’s career in the community. The Shrine Herald also documented the passing of their former pastor and founder. The front page of the November 4th issue featured a large picture of Coughlin at Shrine Catholic Grade School wishing him to rest in peace. In a letter from a member of the parish, the author addressed the passing of Coughlin stating the following regarding the respect and love he had acquired throughout the years:

A warrior has fallen. For days now we have been hearing and reading in the media of the life of Father Charles Coughlin, the founder of our parish. The press has used many phrases and adjectives to describe him, but nowhere have I heard or read what he was to his parish family. We in the parish may or may not have agreed with Father Coughlin's political views, but as our pastor we recognized and loved in him his greatest strength, an indomitable and shining faith in God. His faith was the heart of his sermons and ministrations to his parish family. It was, more than our beautiful church, his endowment to us. It is our heritage now, one that we cherish. It has blessed and enriched our parish. For this we are most thankful. May our Father in heaven remember this and richly reward his faithful servant, Charles Coughlin, a priest forever.

The community mourned the death of their former radio priest and knew no one would ever understand or know him as well as them. His body was held at William Sullivan & Son funeral home in Royal Oak, a family institution opened in 1906 that is located just five minutes from his beloved shrine. A rosary and scripture service was conducted at 8:00 pm on October 30, 1979, and a mass of Christian burial was held on Halloween at 11:00 am. The funeral was well attended. According to the funeral book from Coughlin’s mass of Christian burial, over three thousand members of the community attended his funeral, leading one to conclude that even in the late 1970s Coughlin was still considered a thoroughly important and remembered man. Eight men even offered to be bearers at the funeral.

Also, it appears as if the priests at Shrine of the Little Flower felt a close connection to Coughlin, since they signed their names in a privileged section of the funeral book. A younger priest by the name of Edward Prus signed his name in the relative section of the funeral book. The priest had just been assigned to the parish ten years prior to Coughlin’s death and would remain there for eight more years as a co-pastor. Father Edward Belczak, the current pastor, also signed his name on the list. Former Shrine priests Albert F. Hutting (1934-1939) and Cyril Keating (1934-1941) were also in attendance. While it is unlikely that Prus or any of the other priests were blood relatives to Coughlin, it is clear that these priests felt they were a part of Coughlin’s family. More importantly, Coughlin was still considered part of the Shrine family even after all the years and the scandals. Former and current Shrine priests came together to bury their brother never forgetting all he had done for them, the Shrine, and the community. It appears that even in death Coughlin was very much alive in the minds of the community with thousands coming to pay their respects.

Coughlin was also honored by being buried in the prestigious Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Southfield, Michigan. The cemetery is the final resting place for many famous Catholics around the metro-Detroit area, including former politicians and ironically the cardinal that called for the end of Coughlin’s radio show and periodical, Archbishop Mooney. While Coughlin may have been silenced by the Mooney, his burial placement is quite loud and proud in design and stature. The priest’s grave is adorned with an enormous headstone decorated with a rather large cross. The gravestone, in a way, symbolizes his impact in the community; it was grand and

41 University of Detroit Mercy Library Special Collections, Detroit, Michigan, Guest Book, Funeral of Father Coughlin, October 31, 1979.
42 What makes Father Prus’s signature on the relative page so intriguing is that his nephew is a current history teacher at Shrine Catholic High School. While Father Prus, who has served 55 years in the Catholic Church, may not be a part of Coughlin’s parish anymore, his nephew continues on his legacy. In a way, Coughlin lives on through the nephew of his brother in Christ, Edward Prus. See University of Detroit Mercy Library Special Collections, Detroit, Michigan, Guest Book, Funeral of Father Coughlin, October 31, 1979.
centered on the community’s sense that he was dedicated to God. The grave stone itself was placed to honor and highlight his life in the community.\footnote{Holy Sepulchre Catholic Cemetery, Southfield, Michigan, Father Coughlin.} Although the radio priest said horrible and inexcusable things in his lifetime on his radio shows and even in his periodicals, the church and the community were still committed to showcasing the importance of his life in Royal Oak with the placement of Father Coughlin’s remains and his large headstone in the well-respected cemetery.

Shrine Catholic High School also dedicated its 1980 yearbook to the life of Father Coughlin. The theme of the yearbook, “We can change the World, Rearrange the World,” was meant to mirror the life goals of their famous priest who attempted to change the world during his eighty eight years on earth. Furthermore, in a spread in the yearbook dedicated to the life and death of Father Coughlin a small caption read, “Through a dedication to faith and a desire to change the world, Reverend Charles Coughlin established the Shrine of the Little Flower. Many men have great dreams, but few have the faith to make them a reality in such a way as did Father Coughlin. We shall forever be indebted to him. May Almighty God grant Fr. Coughlin the eternal Peace that he earned in life.”\footnote{Shrine High School Yearbook (Royal Oak: Shrine Catholic High School, 1980).} The community of Shrine of the Little Flower mourned the late Father Coughlin, and this respect was showcased in their yearbook theme and in the small message about Coughlin. Despite all his flaws, the community felt that their priest had changed the world and had done a great service to their community by creating the church and the school hoping that he find eternal peace for all his contributions. Although his body may have died, and his ideas, for the most part, are only accepted by certain older members of the community, his spirit would live on in the community he helped build.
Coughlin Remembered

After his death, Coughlin clearly still remained in the minds of people in his community. However, as the years passed, more and more people began to forget what it was like to have Father Coughlin living in the community but rather just remembered his association with the church, the schools, or a local businesses in town. While the memory of Coughlin still remained, it was not the same as it once was years before. With this being said, those that lived on after Coughlin also had very different memories of him and his parish. While most accounts appear to be positive, remembering what he had done for them or someone in the community, others appear to be a little grim. It seems as if some of the local community saw different versions of the same Coughlin. The man with two identities, national and local, also seemed to be the man of many faces. The following are accounts of Coughlin from people who lived in Royal Oak between the beginning of the parish to the death of the former radio priest. While some accounts may harbor more negative opinions of Coughlin and others sing his praise, what is important to take away from these memories is that the memory of Coughlin does live on in his community. These memories also point to insights of Coughlin’s life that the national community would never know. What is showcased is that these memories are complicated and complex tending to contradict each other, much like Coughlin. Sharing these memories allows others to better understand this complicated priest and more fully comprehend his impact on the people of his community.

Donald Warren, author of Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin: the Father of Hate Radio, also spent some time interviewing some members of the community in the late 1980s to early 1990s. However, what he appeared to uncover were mostly negative memories of Coughlin’s life after his fall from radio in the early 1940s. According to Warren, Coughlin focused a lot of his
attention on his schools in his later years. He took a lot of pride in his schools and expected his students to do the same.\textsuperscript{45} While Warren claims he spent a lot of time in his two high schools, one for the Catholic boys in the community and one for the girls, his facts are clearly mistaken. While the girl’s school was built and occupied, the boy’s school was never finished but rather Coughlin eventually designated the girl’s school for both male and female students.\textsuperscript{46} It is possible that Warren meant the Shrine Grade School that was created a few years prior to the high school or the building and the construction of the boy’s school that was eventually abandoned, but the lack of understanding of the area and Coughlin’s endeavor’s calls the validity of some of Warren’s statements into question.

Nonetheless, Warren states that he had interviewed an attorney associated with Shrine who claimed that Coughlin was very demanding and made many of the students and parents cry when the student’s behavior did not meet his expectations. The same attorney, who appeared to also be a former parishioner, described the experience that drove him from the church. One year his father did not pay his tuition, and he was not aware of the situation. When it was time to receive report cards for the year, all the students were called into the gym. The young man walked up to receive his report card, and when it was his turn, he was not given a report card but rather told he had an outstanding bill and would not be given it. The young freshman explains he made a left out of the exit and never went back to the school. He said he was so embarrassed that he has never gone back to Shrine.\textsuperscript{47}

This same interviewee was also an altar server for the parish, and he remembers Coughlin being quite demanding, believing the altar servers to be his personal servants, there to serve him

\textsuperscript{46} Royal Oak Historical Society, Royal Oak, Michigan, National Shrine of the Little Flower Historical Timeline, November 17, 2005.
not the mass. A former groundskeeper of the parish also recalled events in which Coughlin appeared to generate fear among his employees. According to the groundskeeper, Coughlin’s assistants used to shake in front of him and would not speak in his presence, and nuns would cower fearing his dominant personality. One former priest who worked at the Shrine even stated that he would “pin your chest full of medals and then, as time went by, he’d pick them off of you one by one.” The former groundskeeper also told of a story in which he was asked to blow up the gas station that was associated with the Shrine since it was looking downtrodden. Coughlin assured that the groundskeeper that he would not be caught. The man was frightened and told his wife who was in shock. He said nothing ever came of it, and Coughlin apparently avoided the groundkeeper after the incident probably believing that he went too far asking him to burn down the gas station.  

48

In recent interviews, one woman from the area even claimed to have seen a strange symbol in the Shrine church during the 1970s, years after the former pastor retired. When she was young, her cousin, an organist for the parish, took her to Shrine to look at something that had been uncovered in the tiles of one of a few chapels located on the wings of the large church. When he told her to look down at the floor, she noticed a very well-known symbol in one of the tiles: a swastika. She said she could not believe what she was seeing. She was shocked by the striking Nazi symbol located on the floor of one of the chapel. Years later she visited the church again, and the tile had been removed.  

49

It also seems that she was not the only one to have seen the symbol in the chapel. According to another interviewee who had heard the rumors, it is quite possible that the supposed swastika was, in fact, a popular Egyptian symbol found on many tiles in older floors in the area. The symbol might be coupled with other symbols, such as the fleur de

48 Ibid., 393.
49 Author’s First Interview, January 28, 2016.
lis, which were quite popular designs found on tiles. However, the woman insists that the tile was a swastika based on the direction of the symbol. The removal of just the one tile is clearly suspicious which may have been done to hide Coughlin’s Nazi sympathies and possible even support. The same woman, interestingly enough, also stated that the pillars outside the Roseland Cemetery, the cemetery across the street and down the road from Shrine that the Ku Klux Klan had their supposed memorial service conducted by Coughlin so many years before, were exact replicas of pillars outside a cemetery associated with fascist leader Mussolini. She saw firsthand their striking resemblance on a trip to Italy. Does this point to another fascist connection between Coughlin, or is this just coincidence? The answer is unclear, and no records conclude that Coughlin had any say with what pillars were constructed outside the cemetery. What can be concluded is that Coughlin had clearly become part of the local mythology.

Other accounts of Father Coughlin and his parish were much more positive. One woman born and raised in the area stated that Coughlin’s hatred towards the Jewish people was misunderstood. Coughlin claimed numerous times that it was not the Jewish population that he hated but rather money lenders, not too uncommon for those who had lived through the Great Depression. Coughlin had an intense fear of how money was handled in the United States, something that could easily be demonstrated from many of the books he published and the broadcasts he read. Throughout history, in the eyes of Coughlin, the Jewish people were usually the bankers. His frustration with the bankers could easily be translated, in the eyes of some, as frustration with the Jewish population.

---

50 Author’s Second Interview, January 28, 2016.
51 Author’s First Interview, January 28, 2016.
52 Author’s Second Interview, January 28, 2016.
53 See Charles Coughlin, Money! Answers and Questions (Royal Oak: National Union for Social Justice, 1936) or Broadcasts from the late 1933s found in Charles Coughlin, The Deal in Money (Royal Oak: The Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933) as examples.
54 Author’s Second Interview, January 28, 2016.
A parishioner of Shrine and member of the community, who was also confirmed by the famous Bishop Gallagher when she was nine, made many of the same claims as the previous interviewer. However, she did state that although Coughlin started as a very good and humble priest, by the late 1930s or early 1940s, the press and the power in the community tended to go to his head at times. Yet, he still remained an important and dedicated member of the community. She remembered the construction of the church when she was a little girl and the dire straits the church was in to gather money for its completion. She remembers the Fisher Brothers, an affluent and popular family from Detroit who began the Fisher Body Company known today as Fisher and Company, being good friends of Coughlin and coming to mass and standing in front of parishioners until they emptied their pockets, similar to the story associated with Babe Ruth. The church was so in need for money that at times, she claimed, some were charged twenty five cents even to enter the church for mass.

However, that did not stop many people from attending. According to the woman, Father Coughlin had a huge personality and was a very devoted Catholic. Thousands would flock to his parish every week from all over the country to listen to the priest speak. On one occasion during a Pentecost mass in the 1950s, she stated, Coughlin rigged hundreds of red rose petals to fall from the ceiling at a certain point in the mass showcasing his skills as an entertainer and personality. He was such a commanding presence, she stated, that during the construction of the large shrine, Father Coughlin asked his parishioners if they would donate their unused gem stones to the church in order to decorate the church, and many did so. The woman even stated that while she attended St. Mary’s schools as a young girl in another location of the city and

---

55 Author’s Third Interview, January 28, 2016.
belonged to that parish, her relatives, when they visited from out of town, would always ask to go to the shrine for mass in order to see Coughlin and his mighty Shrine.

Yet what the woman remembered the most about Coughlin was not his theatrics or his beautiful church but rather what he did for those living in the community. According to her, Coughlin was very kind and generous to anyone that worked for him as well as most who came to him for help, contrary to what previous interviewees stated in Warren’s work. On one occasion, in the mid-1950s, a friend of hers was trapped in an abusive relationship and wanted a way out. Her family and friends recommended that she speak to Father Coughlin. The young woman did so, and Coughlin assured her that he would help take care of it. He hired a lawyer who helped settle all the issues, including helping her gain custody of her children. Father Coughlin took care of all the fees out of his own pocket and never asked for anything in return.

The interviewee also recounted another story from the early to mid-1940s involving a classmate of hers and her mother. Recently widowed, the mother and daughter pair moved into the city with nowhere to live. The mother was hired as an assistant for Father Coughlin, and because she worked for the priest, he located a place for her to stay. He lent her a home that seemed to be owned by the parish on 13 Mile and Woodward, adjacent to where the current Shrine High School stands. Her daughter did not even attend the high school but attended St. Mary’s Catholic School, showcasing the priest’s generosity to a family that did not even attend his schools. However, based on the timeline, there is a possibility that the high school was still under construction and had not yet taken over the site where the former public high school was once located.57

A man from the community also claims to have an interesting connection with the former radio priest. His father was the one who installed the air conditioning unit in Coughlin’s house

---

57 Author’s Third Interview, January 28, 2016.
sometime after World War II. His father claimed he was agreeable, and to his knowledge he did not have any problems with the priest. However, the man’s most interesting connection to Coughlin was not his father’s air conditioning business but rather the papers related to Coughlin he still holds to this day. Years ago some neighbors of his who were long time members of Shrine gave him the *Sentential History of the Revolutionary War Papers* published in 1876.

What is so special about this piece is that it is inscribed to Father Coughlin by a United States Senator or Representative. Although no reason is known for why the *Sentential History* was given to the neighbors, the reason behind the gift to Coughlin was that since he was so revolutionary, he deserved the book.58

One of the most interesting memories of Coughlin actually stems from a self-published book that was written as a fundraiser for the Royal Oak Historical Society. The book titled, *The Mayor’s Daughter: A Royal Oak Trilogy*, recounts her life as the mayor’s daughter in Royal Oak. An entire section of the book is dedicated to her memory of the priest. She begins the section by speaking about Father Coughlin’s radio show comparing him to Rush Limbaugh. She claimed that both Catholics and non-Catholics listened to his radio show and that even some of the Jewish people did as well. Many times he would invite children on his show, answering some questions that he posed and claimed her sister was one of these children. She also mentioned Coughlin’s early connections with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Christman claims that Coughlin actually wrote Roosevelt’s nomination acceptance speech, validated by the fact that FDR’s plane stopped in Detroit to pick up the speech, and she has heard the information over the airwaves.

She states that what Charles J. Tull wrote in his book, *Father Coughlin and the New Deal*, about Eleanor Roosevelt denying Coughlin wrote the speech because her husband did not trust him to be untrue. However, the author claims, he may not have fully trusted him, but FDR used the

58 Author’s Fourth Interview, January 28, 2016.
famous orator whenever he could until Coughlin renounced his support for the President in late 1935. In fact, it appears that Coughlin was the one who fully trusted FDR, believing he would bring the changes he believed the world needed.  

Coughlin, according to Christman, is also credited with the phrase the “new deal” that was later appropriated by the FDR administration. She states “that was a term Father used a lot and it was picked up by the Roosevelt administration later on.” When Roosevelt won the presidency Coughlin was thrilled. He believed he could help all the starving people in the Detroit area. Coughlin appeared to worry greatly about the starving people and continually tried to feed them in fields next to the church. This being said, when Roosevelt encouraged farmers to kill their pigs and cows to drive food prices up, Coughlin was outraged, wondering why the president would do such thing. Years later, the author had an intimate talk with Coughlin about the topic, and he stated, “During those years I felt that we could do no wrong. This is what God had called me to do to help the starving unhappy souls, to give them a chance in life, to help reform the government’s thinking for the good of the people not just the wealthy not just the poor, but for everyone.”

As time passed, she claimed, Coughlin began to become more and more disappointed in FDR as he witnessed fewer desired changes. The author comments that Coughlin was not anti-Semitic but rather disliked communists. However, she remembers as a child seeing “Gentile Only” signs in many of the businesses around the area, since many members of the community blamed the Jewish population for “a lot of petty things.” She also remembered when Coughlin was taken off the air stating that President Roosevelt now had the airways all to himself, and now

60 Ibid., 114.
61 Ibid., 114-115.
62 Ibid., 116.
no one could go against what he said. She appeared upset that she could no longer listen to Coughlin’s speeches, and her mother refused to let Coughlin’s *Social Justice* in the house due to her dislike of politics.  

She concluded her section on Coughlin by stating that Coughlin was “one of the finest men that ever lived.” Christman refuted any claims that Coughlin hated Jews once again restating that he hated communism above all. He could not understand how Jewish people, such as Marx, the founder of communism, could give up God in favor of communism. Like many of the other interviewees, Christman also affirmed that some of Coughlin’s supposed hatred of the Jewish population stemmed from his disgust of bankers. The author also stated that she told Father Coughlin once that he helped change history and that the Lord directed his statements. Yet Coughlin said to her in confidence that he regretted some of the terrible things he had stated in the heat of the moment and his endorsement of FDR. He also believed he had changed history by backing the presidential candidate. He too believed God had plans for him, and that everything he did was because God had directed it. She concludes her chapter by defending Coughlin once more believing Coughlin to be a faithful, obedient priest but also one who was not afraid to speak his mind.

*Forever Remembered*

In May of 1992, fifty years since he was officially nationally silenced with the ceasing of the publication of his periodical, a fundraising event was held at Father Coughlin’s former parish. With the encouragement of Detroit’s Catholic and Jewish Communities, Shrine held a ceremony to “exorcise” the ghost of Father Coughlin. It appeared as if the community wanted a

---

63 Ibid., 117.
64 Ibid., 127.
65 Ibid., 127-130.
fresh start. Their former pastor, by this time, had become associated with anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance, and in order to not alienate the surrounding communities, which still includes a large Jewish population, and expand the church, Shrine believed this was the best course of action. It seemed as if many of the National Shrine of the Little Flower members had become ashamed of their famous founder, and in order to recruit new families and remain in good standing in the broader metro-Detroit community, apologizing for Coughlin’s faults seemed the best avenue. The event included an apology from the new head of the parish, Msgr. Alex J. Brunett, who was quoted in a New York Times article stating “I would change history if I could… We need to find forgiveness in our lives whenever possible.”

In the wake of the new millennium times had changed. Few people in the community, especially the younger generations, harbored the same views as Coughlin, and clearly the collective memory of Coughlin had changed.

Yet while Coughlin may have died, his legacy is remembered in the walls of that very church and the schools that attempted to disassociate themselves from him. Although increasingly few people in the community each year will remember Coughlin personally, he will always be a part of the town remembered in numerous ways. The Royal Oak Historical Society continues to have Coughlin exhibits, and while the church seemingly removed their association with the priest, there is still a museum of the founding of the parish within its walls. Coughlin also continues to frequent the local papers despite his death decades ago. In December of 1988, The Daily Tribune announced the creation of a television documentary on the life of Father Coughlin in PBS. In April 29, 2001, The Daily Tribune also printed a large article about Coughlin’s life. Coughlin’s longtime barber is even quoted stating that Coughlin’s memory

---

should be preserved, and he should be remembered for all the contributions he made the community, not just his extreme rhetoric.\textsuperscript{69} In January of 2008, the current pastor of the National Shrine of the Little Flower even sanctioned the creation of a new digital Coughlin historical collection through the University of Detroit Mercy titled \textit{A Historical Exploration of Father Charles E. Coughlin's Influence}. In a letter from Monsignor William Easton, Shrine’s now former pastor, stated the following:

Father Coughlin was the founding pastor of the National Shrine in the Little Flower. As a young priest in 1925 he was sent to Royal Oak to start a new church dedicated to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the first shrine dedicated to her in the United States. Over the years the Shrine community has grown to more than 4,000 families, and is a significant part of the community through social programs and assistance to those in need. The parish members who do remember him, remember Father Coughlin as their pastor; while his public role outside the parish was centered here, it was the pastor that was known in the parish.\textsuperscript{70}

Although the church in 1992 seemed to try to erase Coughlin, Monsignor Easton appears to acknowledge that Coughlin’s memory and association with the church would live on. Clearly Coughlin does not seem to be leaving the community anytime soon.

HE WAS FATHER COUGLIN: A CONCLUSION

In Sheldon Marcus’s account of Father Coughlin’s life, the author mentions John Constable, a Catholic man from Geneva, New York. Constable, in the early 1930s, was very disillusioned with his life and unhappy with how the country was heading in light of the Great Depression. Due to the chaos, Constable began to fall away from the church and become more and more attracted to socialist doctrines. His friends, clearly concerned, advised him to listen to some of the radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin in order to try to restore his faith in the church. Constable was uninterested in the idea originally but stumbled upon a broadcast one day by chance. He was impressed by the priest’s oration and agreed with his views, for example, that the Great Depression was initiated by bankers. He went to bed that night still thinking about the powerful broadcast.

That night Constable had a dream, a vision perhaps, of the Virgin Mary and a priest who stood by his bed. Mary instructed him to go to Royal Oak “to serve her son – Father Coughlin.” The next morning he made plans to move to this new and strange town in order to be close to the priest, and he was later employed as a maintenance worker at Shrine of the Little Flower on his arrival. Constable claimed that when he met the famous radio priest he recognized him immediately as the man who had visited his dream. What is even more remarkable is that Constable wholeheartedly believed that Coughlin represented the second coming, the new Messiah.

To some observers Constable’s visions are compelling and even somewhat believable. He stated that the year Coughlin was born Pope Leo XIII issued the important papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which highlights the rights and duties of capital and labor, most which align with Coughlin’s political stances. Constable also claimed that many of Coughlin’s friends and
followers urged him to run for the presidency in the 1936 election. However, the priest refused to do so, which Constable equated with Jesus refusing the throne when Satan offered it to him. Another similarity, he noticed, was that just like Jesus was crucified, so was Coughlin, in a sense. To Constable, “Coughlin was Christ,” returning to redeem a world of sinners.” His conclusion, however, was that the sinners refused Coughlin and salvation and turned to such leaders as FDR and the Kennedys for guidance.¹

Constable was not the only man who was smitten by Coughlin in his heyday. Millions of people listened to Coughlin’s radio shows, read his periodical, and did their best to support the priest. One kind priest, Father Edward Flanagan, even did his best to send as much money as he could to Coughlin despite the Great Depression and the relative scarcity of funds. Sometimes the organizations he managed came second to supporting the vibrant radio priest.² However, no group or individual loved and respected him more than those from his community, those that lived and worked with and beside him every day. Although the parish attracted many visitors, thousands of members of the community flocked to mass each weekend and also joined the large parish. While much of the world eventually abandoned the radio priest by the beginning of the Second World War, he remained of importance to much of the local community.

The previous pages showed a different side of Coughlin, a parish priest with a dedicated flock and a lot to give to the community. Chapter one introduced the national Coughlin and his life in the limelight as well as his fall from grace. It also examined the biggest, most significant, and well-known contributors to the study of Father Coughlin. However, what was missing was a

¹ Sheldon Marcus, *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 7-8. Additionally, more evidence of Coughlin’s divinity, according to Constable, stemmed from the death of Archbishop Mooney. Mooney, who was appointed to the position after the death of Michael Gallagher, was known as the man who silenced Coughlin, someone Coughlin and his friends would not soon forget. The former archbishop of Detroit died on Coughlin’s birthday while attending the First Ecumenical Council in Rome. When Coughlin was given the news he was quoted saying, “My Father has given me a birthday present.”
² Ibid., 9.
full and accurate study of Coughlin’s life in his community. Chapter two addressed the radio priest’s early years in Royal Oak, his first connections and contributions to the community, his encounters with Ku Klux Klan, and his early rhetoric that attracted a wide audience. Chapter three examined the Royal Oak community’s favorite priest and how the community responded to his actions and presence in the community. It seemed that the more Coughlin did for the community and presented himself in the parish, the more the people of Royal Oak remained devoted and attentive to their radio priest. Even in the hard times he remained important to most. The final chapter showcased Coughlin’s life after the fall of his radio show and his periodical as well as the eventual rejection of his views and leadership of the church. While the rest of the world may have viewed him as a “ghost,” his community could and would not forget his memory. He continues to live on in his parish, his school, and the lives of the people he touched.

While Coughlin’s extreme rhetoric and actions will never be forgotten or excused, it must also not be overlooked that he meant a lot to the people who knew him best. Many of the people interviewed for this project loved and respected Coughlin, and although in some cases they may have not been aware of his more extreme or heated side (or agreed with or ignored it), it does not mean their adoration should not be put into context. As the author of this thesis I have a developed a very interesting relationship with Coughlin. Although I never met the man since he died just over twelve years before I was born, through my research I began to feel like I knew him. His life was placed before me in the numerous narratives, the articles I uncovered on the priest, and the stories I was told by the people in the community who knew him best. I consider myself fortunate since I am both a part of Coughlin’s community and a visitor. I was able to experience his legacy in the community while also being detached, although, at times, that
remained difficult. In a sense I feel as if I was meant to tell his story since I could bring together the faces of Coughlin.

I was born across the street from Shrine Catholic High School. My aunt lived within walking distance to the school and just a short drive from the parish. My grandmother frequently attended the parish, and many of my family members attended the high school throughout the decades. Even so, I was not aware of the power of its pastor until later in life. I spent a majority of my childhood forty five minutes north in a small rural town as well as on the other side of Royal Oak where my grade school was located. It was not until high school when I began at Shrine Catholic High School that I began to understand Coughlin. I heard many stories about the former pastor and his time in the high school. I heard how much he loved the students, frequently visiting the high school to say masses and then excusing the students for the rest of the day to the dismay of the educators. Yet, they were still aware of his checkered broadcasts and publications and some of the unkind words he muttered. This was when I began to understand that he was a complicated character.

After high school I left to pursue my bachelor’s degree at a Benedictine university just outside Chicago and then four years later my master’s degree in a public university just south of Toledo, Ohio. I spent six years away from Royal Oak, and yet I could not forget the conflicting stories I was told of a beloved parish priest and a national bigot. Here was a man that appeared as if he was both. How could one man care so deeply about God, his parish, and the community as a whole but also terrorize the president and those he believed responsible for the Great Depression? The easiest answer is that he was complex. He had many faces; to those he cared about he showed much love and respect, and those he did not respect received his full wrath. In the introduction of his biography of Coughlin, Sheldon Marcus best characterizes the famed
radio priest. I can agree with the apt description of the two faced priest: “This solitary figure was once the most revered, he most loved, the most hated, and the most feared American of his time. He was Christ; he was Hitler; he was savior; he was destroyer; he was patriot; he was demagogue – he was Father Coughlin.”

3 This study upholds Marcus’s conclusion. While most historians tend to focus on the national Coughlin, this thesis demonstrates that he was much more than that. He was also a local priest, a king amongst his subjects, and then a memory that many within the Catholic Church would prefer to forget. Coughlin was one of the most complex religious figures in history, but he is not one that will soon be forgotten. Despite attempts by some, the radio priest is here to stay.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

*Interviews*

Author’s First Interview. January 28, 2016.
Author’s Second Interview. January 28, 2016.
Author’s Third Interview. January 28, 2016.
Author’s Fourth Interview. January 28, 2016.


*Letters*


Marcus-Coughlin Letters. Northwestern University Father Coughlin Special Collections.


Philip Slomovtiz Letter. Northwestern University Father Coughlin Special Collections.


*Newspaper Articles*

*New York Post*


*The Daily Tribune*


“Bishop Staff to Dedicate New Catholic Shrine,” *The Daily Tribune*, June 26, 1926.


“Father Coughlin Sees His Shrine Burn to Ground.” *The Daily Tribune*. March 18, 1936.

“Fire Department’s Work at Shrine is Commended by Shafter after Inquiry.” *The Daily Tribune*. March 18, 1936.


“Original Wooden Church Where Priest Broadcast for Ten Years is Burned.” *The Daily Tribune*. 
March 17, 1937.


Tribune Staff. “Assistant Pastor at Shrine Called to Mt. Clemens.” *The Daily Tribune*. July 1, 1939.


“Wed at Shrine of Little Flower.” *The Daily Tribune*. February 5, 1940.

“Woman Says Husband Tried to Kill Her.” *The Daily Tribune*, June 26, 1926.

*The Detroit Free Press*


*The Detroit News*


*The New York Times*


*Social Justice*


Sources by Charles Coughlin


Various Other Primary Sources


Father Coughlin’s Friends. An Answer to Father Coughlin’s Critics. Royal Oak: The Radio League of the Little Flower, 1940.


Golden Jubilee Coin. Royal Oak Historical Society Father Coughlin Collection


“To All Friends of Father Coughlin.” Northwestern University Father Coughlin Special Collections. Box 7.

The Royal Oak Historical Society Ku Klux Klan Cross

The Royal Oak Historical Society Picture Collection


University of Detroit Mercy Library Special Collections, Detroit, Michigan, Guest Book, Funeral of Father Coughlin, October 31, 1979.
SECONDARY SOURCES


“Father Charles Edward Coughlin, a Brief Biography.” A Historical Exploration of Father Charles E. Coughlin’s Influence.


Marx, Gary Trade. The Social Basis of the Support of a Depression Era Extremist: Father


DATE: December 4, 2015

TO: Victoria Harwood
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [801628-3] The Curious Life of Father Coughlin and Local Community Identity
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: December 2, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: September 22, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 6 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on September 22, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.