

Coughlin's Christian Front

THE GUNPOWDER AND CORDITE PLOT in which seventeen young men of Brooklyn found themselves entangled last week—their silly arsenal uncovered and themselves in jail—traces back to a steady ballyhoo by a little group of political medicine-show spielers including two reckless priests—Father Edward Lodge Curran, president of the International Catholic Truth Society, and Father Charles E. Coughlin, the radio evangelist of Royal Oak, Michigan.

Father Curran, engaged in the propagation of the faith by distributing tracts and admonishing newspapers, has for a long time poured his able efforts into a war on communism. A shrewd and forceful man, he exerted real influence on politics. He had a numerous following. Although not grossly and frankly anti-Jewish in the style of Father Coughlin, he lent his prestige to the anti-Semites without reservation so long as they proclaimed themselves Red-hunters. His young followers went out to lead the persecution, he sat on platforms with them and smiled at broad innuendoes against the Jews, and month after month he blandly marched in step with them.

One of his intimate colleagues is Patrick F. Scanlan, editor of the weekly diocesan paper, *The Brooklyn Tablet*, which kept the discussion hot on the subject of Jewish communism, flatteringly reported Christian Front activities and thrived on the excitement aroused by the Communist bugaboo. Among other substantial figures in this movement were John A. Matthews of Jersey City, one of Frank Hague's judges, Borough President George U. Harvey and Judge Herbert A. O'Brien of Queens and Major John Eoghan Kelly—all of them frequent speakers at Coughlin rallies, all serving to give face to the anti-Semitism which pervaded the atmosphere and never conspicuously rebuking it. They have been elder statesmen. If Father Coughlin now appears bespattered by his Christian Front connections, these men alongside him can hardly call themselves untouched.

And although their effort was self-proclaimed as both a religious and a patriotic crusade, many men in the ranks were non-Catholics, thousands of the most respected Catholics from Gene Tunney to the late Cardinal Mundelein have sought to counteract it, while the patriotic import of it now speaks for itself.

Nearly eighteen months ago frenzied young anti-Communist orators began to make themselves heard on Brooklyn street corners. Chief among them were Floyd A. Caridi, a religious zealot, and John F. Cassidy, a promoter by instinct and a clerk for the gas company by vocation. Cassidy became national director of the Christian Front and was among those arrested as plotters against the government. Wherever the Christian Front was most active, there he was to be seen, and now in jail he forms the brightest and tightest link between the organization and its prompters.

These speakers introduced themselves on the streets as representatives of the International Catholic Truth Society, later as of the Christian American Citizens' Committee Against Communism. They lambasted the Communists and also Mayor LaGuardia, Governor Lehman and President Roosevelt, praised Franco's war in Spain, damned the international bankers and recited a litany of prominent Jewish names at which the audiences booed and snarled. Caridi one evening electrified his crowd by describing insults visited upon nuns in Brooklyn. He shouted, "It is unsafe for a Christian to walk our streets without being called a Christian dog."

Although avoiding the word Jew at these early open-air meetings, the speakers strongly implied the conventional identification with communism, and the hearers themselves yelled "Jew" in angry derision. There were plenty of young Jews to accept the challenge and disorders became a frequent occurrence. One evening in November, 1938, the opposition surged over the speakers' stand and broke up the meeting.

But Cassidy and his men came back the next week with a new pulpit to stand on, a light affair constructed

of lead pipe. In opening the meeting, Cassidy called attention to it—"We have a platform here tonight made of metal, which can be dismantled in ten seconds and used for bludgeons."

While these young men in Father Curran's territory were getting up steam for their crusade, Father Coughlin in his own behalf had been actively supplying inspiration. In May, 1938, he had announced his call for "platoons," and a little later he promised that "When the proper moment arrives and not before that time, Father Coughlin will assemble all organizations whose leaders care to follow him."

In his broadcast of November 6, 1938, Father Coughlin said, "It is necessary for us to solidify and strengthen a virile, closely woven Christian Front." The phrase, Christian Front, cropped up frequently after that in Social Justice. As recruits were gathered by Cassidy in Brooklyn, a similar band formed around Walter D. Ogden, who had a clerical job in the rectory of the Paulist Fathers in West Fifty-ninth Street, Manhattan. They met for a time in a church hall, then moved down the street to Donovan's Hall, adjoining Donovan's Bar, which was a convenient hangout for the Social Justice crew of news vendors. The members as an initial flurry staged an unsuccessful "Vote American" campaign against the reëlection of a Jewish president of the Musicians' Union, and they were fully impregnated already with anti-Semitism. One of them imaginatively proposed engaging an airplane to sky-write "Buy Christian," and another, a Protestant, arose in meeting and announced, "I am ready to line the God-damned Jews right up against the wall."

Discontent was the usual incentive to membership in the Christian Front. Of the seventeen arrested as plotters last week, three were unemployed, two more were listed as "employment unknown" and of most of the others the occupation was not impressively remunerative. In the whole body of perhaps 6,000 Christian Fronters in New York City, unemployment was high, employment was often far below the level of needs and expectations. The Christian Front has centered among the underprivileged.

December 15, 1938, saw the movement come to a head and step out on the career which was to make its fame. Father Coughlin had broken off with radio station WMCA, over the station's objections to his broadcast attack on the Jews, and on this date was held the great rally of protest, promoted by one Allen Zoll. From this oppressively anti-Semitic meeting was organized the picketing which beleaguered the station every Sunday afternoon for nine months, during which time Zoll himself was indicted on a charge of trying to extort money on a promise to call off the nuisance. The speakers included Judge O'Brien, Borough President Harvey and Patrick Scanlan, while among the announced speakers—although they did not show up—

were Father Curran and Cassidy, with General George Van Horn Moseley for good measure.

Father Coughlin was glorified at this meeting and on every occasion of picketing which followed—"Greatest man since Jesus Christ," as speakers chose to identify him—and in these demonstrations his whole campaign of invented terror, the dread of Red riots which he had preached, burst into noisy manifestation. Father Coughlin soon washed his hands daintily of the picket line, just as he had disclaimed anti-Semitism. But already he had published the inflammatory "Protocols" in his magazine, and each weekly issue continued the libel. Social Justice speaks eloquently in spite of disclaimers.

July 31, 1939, the issue which bore Father Curran's photograph on the cover, contained a moving description of "actual conditions" in New York City, with the warning that it would be "but a question of time until New York must witness a hideous repetition of the Bolshevik atrocities that all but destroyed Madrid and Barcelona. The brave patriots of the Christian Front have their work cut out for them if they would restore Gotham to America."

Last summer also Social Justice proclaimed Father Coughlin "our last bulwark against Bolshevism. Unless millions of additional citizens are reached this fall and winter, the great engulfment can easily take place." On October 30 it warned, "Thus is America to be hamstrung, handed over after a holocaust of blood to the world-revolutionists of Moscow."

Late in July Father Coughlin issued his defiance over the radio, "Rest assured we will fight you Franco's way if necessary. Call this inflammatory if you will. It is inflammatory. I understand that units of the Christian Front have formed and are forming in New York City and elsewhere. Does that mean anything to you Bolsheviks?"

Father Coughlin's talk and the whipped-up sense of danger which he imparted were echoed promptly by Cassidy. Early in January, 1939, the young leader at the Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn announced that he was recruiting a Christian Front of able-bodied men and urged his hearers to buy guns. "We are going to do the same thing to the Communists here," he said, "that Franco is doing in Spain. We are not going to stand it much longer."

In Philadelphia last July 14, Cassidy advised an audience, "There is no law under the constitution which prohibits a man from belonging to a defensive organization. If you put two and two together, you will know what I mean." In Brooklyn in September, in a hall decorated with Christian Front emblems, he was quoting the Constitution on the right of the people to bear arms, followed by a recruiting talk.

Having started his career as a protégé of Father Curran's International Catholic Truth Society, Cassidy developed a frequent association with Father Curran.

Both were interested in the Coughlin rally for "free speech" at Prospect Hall, Brooklyn, on January 25, last year. Father Curran was a principal speaker, denouncing The Jewish Examiner for what he termed a scurrilous attack on Patrick Scanlan, and Albert Einstein for wanting the Spanish embargo lifted. If Einstein didn't like it here, he advised, let him go back where he came from. Cassidy helped promote the meeting, as did the Manhattan organizations of Allen Zoll and Walter Ogden.

Again on June 25 Cassidy received a special citation from Bernard D'Arcy, New York circulation manager for Social Justice, who praised him for helping promote the sale of the paper. This was at a meeting of Christian Fronters in Donovan's Hall, to which Father Coughlin spoke by wire from Royal Oak. And Father Coughlin himself added the crowning touch when he spoke again by wire to a great rally in Philadelphia on July 14, praising "the heroism and zeal of the Christian Front," according to Social Justice. The conclusion of Father Coughlin's address gave the accolade—"God bless John Cassidy and the Christian Front."

When the great Franco Victory Celebration was held in Brooklyn, May 22, both Father Curran and Cassidy were speakers, and also D'Arcy, Patrick Scanlan, Major Kelly, Judge Matthews and Judge O'Brien, the latter reading a personal message from their idol in Royal Oak. Cassidy praised General Moseley and urged the Dies Committee to postpone any inquiry into anti-Semitic plotting. No less close and intimate was the linking together of Father Curran, Scanlan and Cassidy in October, when they were billed as leaders of the committee arranging the Coughlin Birthday Ball.

If more is needed to prove Cassidy's good standing in the true Coughlin ranks last fall, it may be noted that he was introduced as a distinguished guest in Boston, September 8, at a Social Justice mass meeting presided over by the local Christian Front organizer, Francis P. Moran. Last week Moran was being sought by the police as a part of the general round-up of Cassidy and his alleged fellow plotters, according to The New York Times, but he was reported absent. Moran spoke with Father Curran at a meeting of Coughlin followers in Pawtucket on November 10.

Father Curran's close comradeship with Father Coughlin hardly needs to be elaborated. He was billed as the star speaker at Coughlin meetings last summer almost throughout the territory of the Father's radio network, from St. Paul to Cincinnati and Philadelphia. Speaking at a Christian Front rally at St. Louis on September 21, his meeting was the scene of a striking display of anti-Jewish literature, including the forged Protocols and the pamphlets of William Dudley Pelley. The Auxiliary Bishop of St. Louis promptly deplored that display in a public statement. Father Curran went on the radio to answer a criticism of

Father Coughlin by Elliott Roosevelt, the President's son, and wrote a signed column in Social Justice.

"I have heard some objections in my travels to the fact that certain groups use the terminology 'Christian Front,'" said Father Curran in a speech at the high-school auditorium in Nashua, New Hampshire, October 26. "I don't know why anyone should object to that term. I don't object to a Jewish front. . . . Why in the name of common sense is there anything wrong about the title 'Christian Front?' . . . A Christian Front of course must be maintained, and let me tell you this, it isn't Christianity which produces anti-Semitism—it is Semitism which produces anti-Semitism."

After a sketchy acquaintance with Father Coughlin it appeared coy even of him to wash his hands so completely of the Christian Front the moment his followers were locked up on an embarrassing charge. His first response was to say that already he had "roundly disavowed" the Christian Front. He had advocated "a Christian Front" but never had supported the "specific" Christian Front involved in the conspiracy charges. He wanted "a real Christian Front to oppose these fakers." It was that Christian Front, perhaps, which he advised only a month before to "meet force with force." Then after a week of baffling silence he came back to say that, "I do not dissociate myself." He "reaffirmed" and "reëncouraged." He attacked the attackers of the Christian Front. In short, he had decided to keep on promoting his Red scare.

What he had "roundly disavowed," it appeared to many searchers of his writings, had been the Christian Mobilizers, an offshoot from the Cassidy-Ogden group which carried the pristine anti-Semitism to raucous extremes not considered good form even by the Christian Front leadership. The Christian Mobilizers continued their lip-service to Father Coughlin, however, and held a birthday ball, the proceeds of which they sent to him. And that check he is said to have returned.

His disavowal of the Christian Front had been gentle indeed. He announced on August 14, "I am neither the organizer nor the sponsor of the Christian Front." His policy, he said, was to hold aloof from all organizations, and "I must not depart from this policy even in the case of the Christian Front."

But there had been a time when Father Coughlin had need for exactly the services the Christian Front could render, in December, 1938, when the storm over his anti-Semitism and his controversy with station WMCA was at its height. He needed help. And he was far from repudiation then. I have seen the notes jotted down by men who were at the meetings, and they tell of a speaker reading a letter from Father Coughlin and of another getting up to tell of a recent visit he had paid to the Father at Royal Oak, and their pleas were the same. Father Coughlin wished his friends of the Christian Front to write to Archbishop

Mooney, his superior in Detroit, and to the Apostolic Delegate in Washington, expressing approval of his broadcasts, denying that he was attacking the Jews and begging that he be permitted to continue. The members acted at once, drafting and signing letters as if they were petitions.

After the long continued inflammatory campaign of Father Coughlin which centered on the threat of Communist uprising and the necessity to be prepared in Franco's way, with young bloods such as Cassidy re-

peating and enlarging every thrill and respectables such as Father Curran and Scanlan giving their consent, the sight of seventeen young men losing their heads and reaching for bombs appears startling only for its moderation. The number logically should have been much larger, although the entire incident may prove to be not important. Certainly of far greater concern is the steady dissemination of hatred and fear to millions of minds by these leaders in eminent positions who must, in fact, know better.

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