

CHAPTER VI

FATHER COUGHLIN: PRIEST OR POLITICIAN

ONE of the puzzles of the 1935 pre-election maneuvers was the question, where is Father Coughlin going? Was he still for his famous slogan, Roosevelt or Ruin, or had he gone over to the slogan of the American Liberty League, Ruin Roosevelt? The mystery may have been solved by the time that this book has been published. But as this is being written, the famous radio priest alternates between these two points of view from one weekly sermon to the other. Father Coughlin is a political force that will play an important part in the 1936 elections. Around his personality there have gathered a considerable part of the discontented people of the country. His persuasive tones and hazy arguments have appealed to the broad but vague radicalization arising from the disasters of the crisis.

Father Coughlin is carrying through some very complicated political maneuvers. He is trying to capitalize on the mass support of Roosevelt and his New Deal. At the same time he is trying to gather up all those people who are discontented and disillusioned because of the bankruptcy of Roosevelt's program. This is the technique of the delayed split. It is the same kind of maneuver that General Hugh Johnson is carrying out, and it is leading in the same direction. They are against Roosevelt and for him all at the same time. They try to corral his honest followers and also get those who

have left him in disgust over the outcome of his policies.

The technique is similar to the sleight of hand of a magician—the hand is quicker than the eye. A gesture towards the Left hides a step towards the Right. Father Coughlin's complaint that Roosevelt makes concessions to the Jewish bankers covers up his attempt to carry his followers another step toward the Liberty League. Like his illustrious radio enemy, the battling General Johnson, Father Coughlin fits snugly into the 1936 campaign strategy of the Republican Party-Liberty League-Hearst alliance. The idea is to split the Democratic Party from both the Right and the Left, to gut the mass following of the New Deal, and fuse these sections with the Republican Party into a great battering ram that will smash the Roosevelt administration and place into power the most reactionary, the most fascist forces in American political life.

In estimating the significance of Father Coughlin it is of little use to examine his formal program, the sixteen points of his Union for Social Justice. They are so vague that they mean all things to all men. Even Herbert Hoover could sign this program without blinking an eye. His real program must be sifted out from the chaff of his innumerable and contradictory radio sermons on the issues of the day.

Certain features of Father Coughlin's sermons are in harmony with the shibboleths of Hearst and the Liberty League. The main enemy, all of them shout, is Communism, Socialism, Marxism, foreign ideas. If we don't crush these influences, they say, then fascism is inevitable. Thus they attempt to introduce fascism under the banner of the struggle against fascism. Their fight to destroy democracy is carried out under the slogan of the defense of American democracy. The right of the capitalists to sabotage production is defended by attacking Roosevelt's attempt to organize that sabotage through

the government. Trade unionism is attacked by identifying it with the bureaucratic excesses of the reactionary wing of the A. F. of L. leadership. Company unionism is promoted in the name of freedom for all working men. Culture, science, education are to be protected from subversive influences by a regime of loyalty oaths and witch-hunting. Americanism and love of country are prostituted to the vilest chauvinism, to the service of reactionary domestic and foreign policy. American isolation is used to mask brazen support of fascism abroad.

The chief constant note in Father Coughlin's appeal to the masses is his cry that all of our troubles, all the poverty and degradation of the masses, arise from the fact that there is not enough money in the country. Inflation is the beginning and end of his program. It is characteristic of the present confusion of American politics and of the Machiavellian strategy of the Liberty League, that the arch-inflationist Father Coughlin can become an effective tool in the hands of the sound money reactionaries that dominate the anti-Roosevelt concentration.

It is in this light that we must judge the merits of Father Coughlin as leader and politician. It is in this light that we must judge the value of his inflation program. That he is a priest representing the Roman Catholic hierarchy is an incident that reveals little to us. That hierarchy, a political machine of great importance in our national life, is indeed also catholic in the sense that it tries to have its representatives in every camp and grouping, in every movement which does not go outside the limits of the existing social order. An even more influential representative of this hierarchy is Al Smith, a leading sound money advocate, and one of the moving spirits behind the Liberty League. We can therefore ignore Father Coughlin's priestly robes, except as they reveal

his connections with the whole complex web of capitalist politics in general. We must emphasize that here we are not dealing with questions of religion, but only of politics.

What would inflation really mean? Let us apply it to the bonus question, for instance. It would mean that the bonus would be paid in new additional dollars, run off on the printing press, and not taken from the accumulated wealth of the rich. Increasing the supply of paper money would make every single dollar worth that much less, while the total amount of currency would have the same, or even less, purchasing power. With every step towards greater inflation, every dollar of wages would buy less food, less clothing, and less of all other goods. If the bonus should be paid by inflation its value to the veterans as purchasing power would be cut and, at the same time, what value still remained would be taken out of the pockets of the already impoverished working people. And when inflation passes beyond individual acts like the payment of the bonus, and becomes a general policy, then wages become less and less valuable, and the small savings of the workers and the middle classes become so much waste paper, worth even less than the blank paper on which they are printed. Payment of the bonus by means of inflation means to pay in promises that never will and never can be redeemed.

We Communists fight and have always fought for the payment of the bonus to ex-servicemen. We further fight for general social insurance, paid by the government. We are for the Workers Unemployment, Old Age and Social Insurance Bill, H.R. 2827, now before Congress with the approval of the Labor Committee of the House of Representatives.

But we demand that the ex-servicemen and the unemployed shall be paid in real money, and not in bogus promises even if they are put on paper. We demand that they be paid with

money taken from the rich, by sharply graduated taxes on incomes above \$5,000 a year, by heavy taxes on inheritances and estates, and on the accumulated surpluses of the big corporations. There is plenty of wealth in the country to pay for all of those necessary things. But all this wealth is in the hands of the rich. There is no magic formula by which it can be obtained, except by taking it away from the rich. This can be done by taxation, for which the government has full power. If the government refuses to do this, then there is another way, the way pointed out by Lincoln, who declared that when the people become dissatisfied with their government they have the inherent right to change, or overthrow it, and set up a new one which will carry out their will.

Father Coughlin is not only a politician, he is also a businessman. He is the kind of businessman who springs up and grows rich and fat in inflationary periods. He has proven the sincerity of his belief in inflation by speculating on a large scale in silver. The government itself revealed that Father Coughlin was one of the largest speculative dealers and holders of silver in America. Each time that another step towards more inflation is taken, a step which reduces the purchasing power of the masses, which cuts down the amount of bread and milk that the workers can buy, the wealth of Father Coughlin increases by more tens of thousands of dollars. The Right Reverend Father can then make more speeches on the radio, urging still more inflation, that will bring him many more hundreds of thousands to pay for more speeches for more inflation, which will bring more profits, and so on *ad infinitum*—or as near to infinity as empty stomachs and the desperation of the masses will allow the process to continue. The inflation program is leading us towards the speculators' paradise of Father Coughlin, but this paradise is the deepest hell for the toiling population.

Father Coughlin has defended his politics by asking: "Is not a priest also a citizen, and have I not also the right to enter politics?" Yes, worthy Reverend, you have this right, and so do all speculators have the right to be in politics. But we also have the right, and the duty, to warn the masses against speculators in politics who advocate inflation as a means of lining their own purses.

Father Coughlin has defended his speculations by asking: "Have I not the same right to buy and sell as every other man?" Yes, worthy Reverend, you have the same rights as any other speculator. But we have the right and the duty to warn the masses against following the advice of a man who profits from the hunger of their children.

When Father Coughlin attacks Communists, he does not say that he fights them because they propose to tax the rich to feed the poor. He does not say that he is against them because of their final program that the masses of the people shall own the industries now monopolized and kept idle by the parasitic rich. He does not want to talk about these things so he attacks the Communists because he claims that he wishes to "preserve our democratic institutions", which he says the Communists would supplant by a "dictatorship".

Where was Father Coughlin when, in his own state of Michigan, the enemies of democracy enacted the infamous Dunkel Bill, a measure which takes away the democratic rights of everyone who thinks that the present system must be changed? Why was he silent about the flood of anti-labor and alien and sedition bills in Congress and in the state legislatures, which aimed at killing the remnants of democracy in America? Why has he never spoken a word on the Scottsboro case? On Angelo Herndon? On Tom Mooney? On the murders and frame-ups, kidnappings and beatings, of workers taking place all over the country? We must ask

Father Coughlin whether all these things are part of the "democracy" for which he speaks and claims to fight.

If he is really such a staunch advocate of democracy, how much of it does he apply in his Union for Social Justice? What do the members have to say about the running of the organization? How does democracy work in the Union? Did the members select the business manager who runs the Union for Father Coughlin, or was he appointed by General Motors, for whom he was a high priced lobbyist and labor union smasher until he left that lucrative post to help Father Coughlin fight for democracy?

Father Coughlin's real belief about democracy is contained in his statement: "I am the Union for Social Justice." This is identical with the "democracy" of Louis XIV whose words, "I am the State", have gone down the centuries as the classical expression of irresponsible despotism. Father Coughlin will excuse us if we doubt the sincerity of his "democratic" principles. His words must be understood in the same way as the declaration made by Herr Hitler (whom he admires so much), at a time when trade unionists, Communists, and Socialists were being executed, and while he was preparing the "trial" for treason of Ernst Thaelmann: "The Third Reich is a complete democracy."

Father Coughlin will pardon us, if we say that the tears that he sheds together with his dear friend Mr. Hearst over the "sad plight" of the workers in the Soviet Union look to us like crocodile tears. We believe that he is really weeping over the capitalists and aristocrats who lost one-sixth of the earth to the common people. They are now busily building a great, prosperous, strong, peaceful, socialist society, with the greatest democracy ever known in history, while rich capitalist countries like the United States are putting their millions of

unemployed on a wage just a trifle too much to die on, but not enough to live on.

Father Coughlin is an arrant hypocrite to weep over the happy and prosperous Soviet Union, while he supports the setting up by American imperialism of the Cuban government of Batista-Mendieta, controlled by the Chase and National City Banks. It is this government which murders workers and peasants every day, which starves the whole population and closes down the schools in order to pay interest on loans made by Wall Street, those loans used to set up the military regime that protects its vested interests.

Father Coughlin has many times said that he is for the working man, and we know that many workers are hanging on his words and look to him for leadership. But why did he employ non-union labor, until he changed recently in order to get a union label on his printed matter, like a ward politician running for Alderman for the first time? Why did he speak against trade unions until the resolutions passed against him by the 55th Convention of the American Federation of Labor put a temporary stop to this? Why was he silent during all the automobile strikes? Why has he never said a word against the murderous speed-up, spy system, and oppression used by General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler, although this was admitted by the Planning and Research Division of the N.R.A. in its report on the auto industry? Why did he more recently go out of his way to praise General Motors, that symbol of oppressive monopoly capital, in the most extravagant terms? Is it because the auto magnates contribute big sums to his Radio League, his Shrine of the Little Flower, and his Union for Social Justice?

When Father Coughlin spoke in New York in the spring of 1935 he made one remark that won a great demonstration of approval from his audience. He said:

"My friends, if we are forced to see \$19 or even \$50 a month paid for such work in what we call a New Deal, then this plutocratic capitalistic system must be constitutionally voted out of existence."

This remark was all the more significant because nothing like it can be found in his published words. Because it was new and has not been repeated, we can say that it was not taken from his program. Indeed the latter sets itself the opposite task, and promises to preserve without fundamental change this "plutocratic capitalistic system". It was a concession which he made unwillingly to the anti-capitalist sentiments and ideas among the masses whom he wishes to keep behind his reactionary program.

Whatever the motive which caused him to utter these words, they were and still are very important words. The applause of his audience was even more significant. It is certainly not unfair to assume that the applause was not given to the word "constitutionally" which he inserted in his remark. His audience did not need to pay two dollars a seat to hear him talk about the Constitution. They could have heard Hamilton Fish or Herbert Hoover do the same for nothing. What they were applauding was the idea, unexpected as it was, coming from him, of getting rid once and for all of the capitalist system which, as they have learned from bitter experience, is the cause of all their misery and suffering.

Father Coughlin is playing on the hopes of the suffering masses, playing upon their increasing misery, their growing unrest, and radicalization. He is making an attempt, which can be compared to the earlier phase of Hitler in Germany, to rally the desperate masses behind the policies of the Liberty League, which are against their own vital interests. He is trying to utilize them to defend the interests of the Rockefellers about whom he has maintained a most significant silence as

well as the interests of the Morgans whom he once demagogically denounced.

This game of Father Coughlin's will have its little day. It may serve his personal interests to the extent of enriching him so that he will have no material worries until the time when the working class takes over the whole country and puts everyone to work at useful labor. But this game cannot be carried as far in the United States as Hitler carried it in Germany. The Reverend Father imitates Hitler, but he forgets that the masses have learned from Hitler as well as he did. The masses are asking questions today. He will have to answer them long before he is able to silence all questioning lips with concentration camps and the executioner's axe.

The guarantee of this is to be found in his own meetings and in his own audiences. When he spoke hypocritically about ending the plutocratic capitalist system he was only indulging in some professional hot air. But when his audiences applaud such statements, they express the deepest sentiments of their hearts. They express a will and a determination to bring about this desire of their hearts, and they are beginning to move in this direction. Father Coughlin will not forever be able to stop this movement of his own followers. He will not be able to do so because the Communist Party is among them, talking with them, raising questions, discussing their problems, and pointing out the road to organization which leads to successful struggles and which will win a prosperous and peaceful socialist society.