

Father Coughlin, John A. Ryan, and Catholic Social Teaching

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For Mom, Dad, Liam, and Rory

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INTRODUCTION

Father Charles Coughlin and Monsignor John A. Ryan were two of the most popular exponents of Catholic social teaching in America. Catholic social teaching is an important, but often neglected, discipline that applies Catholic doctrines to current affairs. Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is generally considered to be the origin of modern Catholic social teaching. Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, which marked the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and expanded upon its themes, was also hugely influential. Catholic social teaching took slightly different forms in each country, as Catholic intellectuals tried to apply its ideas to their unique national systems. To understand the debate between Coughlin and Ryan, and the larger Catholic debate over the New Deal, one must first have a sense of the history and breadth of Catholic social teaching and where the two men fit into it.

Before 1891, the Church had largely avoided commenting on social questions, even while industrialization upended many of the traditional social relations across Europe. Some early attention to these issues came in the mid-18th century, especially after the wave of revolutions in 1848. As the new philosophies of liberalism, democracy, socialism, and nationalism - all often accompanied by anticlericalism - continued to spread, the Church finally felt it had no choice but to respond. Pope Leo XIII's 1891 *Rerum Novarum* marked a fundamental change in papal policy. Into the debate between liberalism and socialism stepped the Church, which denounced them both. It offered instead a system based on natural hierarchies, private property, with

limits to prevent domination of the poor, and a guild-inspired corporatist system to foster class cooperation, instead of class war. In response to this seismic shift, Catholic intellectuals rapidly began applying Catholic doctrine, both from the Bible and from earlier thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, to all of society's economic problems. Thus, the modern discipline of Catholic social thought was born. Its foundational emphases, as later recorded in the Vatican Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, include safeguarding "the dignity of the human person" and working towards "the common good" (VCSDC).

This new movement inspired the formation of Catholic trade unions and political parties across Europe. No Catholic political parties formed in America, in part due to the existing Catholic influence within the Democratic Party.¹ Some Catholics did found the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists in 1937, but it functioned more as an interest group within larger industrial unions such as the CIO, rather than an independent union.² The rise of Catholic social thought coincided with the increasing prominence of Catholics as a Democratic voting bloc, and so Catholic intellectuals sometimes became influential figures within that party.

Both Charles Coughlin and John Ryan can be clearly situated within the milieu of Catholic social thought. Though both displayed some uniquely American features, as well as some Populist influence, their most frequent sources remained the Bible

¹ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

² Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 211-212

and the encyclicals. More than any other figures at that time, they fleshed out the political ramifications of Catholic ideas in an American context.

The Great Depression elevated both Coughlin and Ryan to new levels of popularity, as the desperate public sought answers to their economic questions, and in some cases a new system altogether. Franklin Roosevelt's pioneering use of radio to promote his economic vision has been thoroughly documented, but much less attention has been given to the similar efforts of Father Charles Coughlin. Of the many voices competing for the attention of Americans anxious for their economic futures, Coughlin was one of the most prominent and most controversial.

Thanks to the large American Catholic population, Coughlin had a wide audience, but he was far from the only Catholic voice. Father John A. Ryan, a longtime labor activist and professor who in some ways set the stage for Coughlin, offered a different interpretation of the same Catholic doctrines. In the two decades before Coughlin's rise, Ryan's writings on economic and social justice had earned him critical acclaim and legitimized the idea of a Catholic economic perspective in America. He based most of his arguments on papal encyclicals, particularly Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, which had inspired a new body of Catholic social thought. Coughlin too situated his arguments within this new intellectual stream, often quoting directly from encyclicals while on the air. Add to this the fact that both men hailed from the agrarian Midwest and showed an early fondness for Populism, and it is no surprise that, at least in Coughlin's early years, the two appeared ideologically very close.

Coughlin, the radio priest, broadcast his economic populism to an audience of millions, while Ryan, the academic, garnered a significant role in the Roosevelt administration. From 1932 to 1936, both men served as some of Roosevelt's loudest champions, at a time when Catholics were one of the key Democratic voting blocs. This harmony did not last. Coughlin's increasing political ambitions and Roosevelt's desire to keep the controversial priest at arm's length created friction, which came to a head in late 1935. With the assassination of Huey Long, Coughlin found himself the most prominent populist voice in the country. He disavowed Roosevelt and announced the formation of a new third party - the Union Party - whose candidate would challenge Roosevelt in the upcoming election. Ryan, who by then had held posts in the administration and actively campaigned for Roosevelt, publicly denounced Coughlin, sparking a lengthy feud both in print and on the air. Chapter 2 of this essay will cover this debate in detail, and trace the intellectual and personal roots of the disagreement. After a hasty and haphazard campaign, Coughlin's candidate barely made an impact on the polls while Roosevelt coasted into the largest electoral victory in American history. Coughlin's pride was irrevocably shattered.

At his peak, Coughlin, along with other radical figures like Huey Long and Francis Townsend pulled Roosevelt to the Left on economic issues, prompting his more ambitious "Second New Deal." The implosion and defeat of Coughlin's Union Party left him embittered and sent him on a gradual drift towards extremism and anti-Semitism. Over the next six years he lost the support of most of his audience, as well as the official Catholic hierarchy. The final straw came when he began praising fascist

governments, even as the United States headed for war with these same powers. When war finally did break out, the Catholic hierarchy, under intense pressure from the Roosevelt administration, permanently banned him from using radio. He spent the rest of his career as he had begun, a local parish priest, until he died in 1979.

Ryan remained a respected public figure until his death in 1945, though his dream of an American economy based on Catholic principles had never come to fruition. The First New Deal, which Ryan had championed as near perfectly aligned with Catholic social thought, had suffered Supreme Court defeats and conservative backlash. The Second New Deal leaned much more Keynesian than Catholic, though Ryan could take solace in programs designed to aid the poor. More so than Coughlin, Ryan's intellectual influence endured, particularly on Catholic labor activists like Philip Murray of the CIO. It is also true, however, that Coughlin's dynamic use of radio, and his blurring of the lines between populism and demagoguery, have found their followers in subsequent years as well. Chapter 3 of this essay will explore the legacies and enduring appeal of both men.

When reading Coughlin and Ryan, the word "liberalism" often appears, and to understand their arguments, it is also important to define the Catholic conception of "liberalism" from that time period. In most cases, Catholic intellectuals used "liberalism" to refer to the classical liberalism of the 19th century.³ Though considered a type of conservatism today, Classical Liberalism was radical for its time. Though interpretations varied, it always emphasized individual liberty, in both economic and

³ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 54

cultural spheres.⁴ The Church feared that too much individual liberty would lead to irreligion and immorality among the populace. Furthermore, the idea of “progress” built into liberalism was antithetical to Church’s emphasis on tradition.⁵ The encyclicals from the 19th century show a clear discomfort with the emerging concept of “modernity,” of which liberalism was a key part.⁶ Making matters worse, Liberalism had a mostly Protestant heritage and, in the eyes of the Church, was overly humanist, at the expense of focus on God.⁷

In the economic sphere, Catholic thinkers feared that too much individual liberty for the rich would inevitably lead to “industrial autocracy” and prevent workers from achieving any kind of material security.⁸ The resulting poverty of most workers robbed them of the time and energy to the pursuit of their “eternal salvation.”⁹ Compounding this effect was that, in their view, pure liberalism ignored the human rights of workers and reduced them to their economic value.¹⁰ This allowed governments to treat workers’ poverty as an economic problem, rather than a social problem. Since classical liberalism held that the government should not intervene to address economic problems, this left workers stranded in poverty. *Rerum Novarum* challenged this notion, and argued that the state should correct the worst abuses of

⁴ Michael Freeden. *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 2, 14; See Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 78

⁵ *Ibid* 61

⁶ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003)

⁷ Michael Freeden. *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 8, 25

⁸ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 22

⁹ *Ibid* 25

¹⁰ *Ibid* 25

liberalism and work towards a mutually beneficial arrangement between capital and labor.¹¹ This brought Catholic thinkers somewhat in sync with the emerging American Progressive movement, but antipathy remained in the cultural sphere, where Catholics sought to regulate issues like birth control and pornography.¹²

Written forty years after *Rerum Novarum*, in 1931, *Quadragesimo Anno* calls for much more economic intervention by the government. The authors of *Rerum Novarum* had had to show restraint in their calls for government action, since it was not common in the late 19th century. By 1931, the evolution of Catholic social thought, as well as the rise of Progressivism, had eliminated the taboo in America surrounding state intervention, though conservatives still opposed it. In the years immediately following *Quadragesimo Anno*, the New Deal substantially shifted the debate over government action in favor of a more active role for the state.

The historiography of Charles Coughlin has changed dramatically in the decades since the end of his radio career. As Alan Brinkley notes, Coughlin's post-1936 turn towards extremism and praise of fascist governments "tended to obscure and distort a larger political significance," and caused many contemporary scholars to label him a fascist.¹³ Suspicion of "mass politics" in the 1950s, in part inspired by McCarthyism, led Richard Hofstadter to label Coughlin an example of the "paranoid style" in American public discourse.¹⁴ Alan Brinkley provided the next major revision

¹¹ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 44

¹² John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

¹³ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). x

¹⁴ *Ibid* x-xi

in the 1980s, continuing some older identifications of Coughlin with the populist designation, but trying to strip the elitism from Hofstadter's arguments. According to Brinkley, Coughlin and his movement were "manifestations" of "the urge to defend the autonomy of the individual and the independence of the community against encroachments from the modern industrial state," which by the 1930s was largely supplanting the American tradition of localism.¹⁵ With regards to Coughlin's ideological roots, Brinkley correctly points out that, as a Catholic who had spent much of his life in Canada, Coughlin's small-P populism did not derive from "direct connection with the agrarian populism of late nineteenth century America," but instead from "related populist sentiments that were emerging in other societies at roughly the same time."¹⁶ These related sentiments grew out of the new discipline of Catholic social thought, which had grown exponentially following the 1891 publication of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. This essay seeks to expand Brinkley's portrait of Coughlin and clarify the relation of his seemingly populist views with the larger body of Catholic Social Thought. Though Coughlin can justifiably be viewed as part of the agrarian populist tradition in America, this is largely based on a similarity of ends, not of sources. Coughlin's social philosophy was firmly anchored in the Catholic social thought of his time.

Since the 1980s, the rise of figures like Pat Buchanan, Ross Perot, and Donald Trump has fueled a new wave of interest in both Coughlin and populism. Trump's rise,

¹⁵ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). xi

¹⁶ Brinkley. "Comparative Biography as Political History: Huey Long and Father Coughlin." 12

especially, has helped the study of Coughlin break out of academia and into the media. Much in the way that McCarthy's rise led to a suspicion of mass politics among elites, many of these journalists have revived Hofstadter's interpretations of Coughlin as part of the same "paranoid style" that gave us President Trump.¹⁷

John A. Ryan has received much less scholarly attention than Father Coughlin, his contemporary and, at times, his opponent. Laura Murphy highlights Ryan as one of the earliest and most important figures in the modern American living wage movement, but points out that his influence has been greatly "underestimated."¹⁸ As an activist, Ryan had a significant impact in the areas of minimum wage legislation and child labor, working with numerous interest groups and government agencies.¹⁹ His prolific writings, which covered a wide range of social and economic issues, and interpretations of new Catholic thought, influenced countless other reformers across the nation.²⁰ While Coughlin's period of notoriety lasted only about 10-15 years, Ryan's career spanned almost four decades. His relative obscurity outside of the discipline of Catholic history is unfortunate, since of the two, he certainly had a much more substantial and enduring impact on American society.

¹⁷ See Richard Hofstadter. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*

¹⁸ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 64

¹⁹ *Ibid* 64

²⁰ See *A Living Wage*, "Bishops Program for Social Reconstruction," etc.

CHAPTER ONE: Catholic Social Teaching

The discipline of Catholic social teaching emerged from a period of upheaval in Europe, in which the Church underwent many important changes. One cannot approach the arguments of Coughlin or Ryan without an understanding of the worldview outlined in *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, and the context in which those documents were written.

The late 19th century was a desperate time for the Catholic Church, as new ideologies eroded its social influence. Liberalism had achieved dominance, to varying extents, in most Western European economies. This new philosophy, and the related capitalist economy, had overturned many of the traditional hierarchies that underpinned the Catholic worldview. The authors of the encyclicals tended to identify liberalism and capitalism as one and the same, though they sometimes separated the two and did not condemn capitalism to the same extent.¹ The suffering of workers under capitalism had fueled the spread of socialism across Europe. Socialist intellectuals openly attacked clerical authority, while labor unions threatened to co-opt one of the church's most important constituencies, the working class. The Papacy viewed these developments with alarm. Members of the church hierarchy saw socialism and liberalism as serious threats, and sought to formulate an alternative based in Catholic doctrine, which would preserve the church's moral authority.

¹ See *Quadragesimo Anno* 101 for the argument that capitalism is "not of its own nature vicious"

While its social influence declined, the church's temporal power also gradually disappeared in the face of the new nationalist movements. During a wave of revolutions that threatened conservative monarchies across Europe, Pope Pius IX was driven completely out of Rome. He was only later reinstated with the help of French troops. Over the next few decades, the Papal States gradually lost territory to its secular neighbors, until the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia conquered Rome in 1870 and created the unified nation of Italy. This marked the practical end of the Church as a temporal power.

Catholic social teaching can trace its origin almost completely to Leo XIII's promulgation of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. It synthesized older Catholic doctrines, particularly those of Thomas Aquinas, with new ideas to create a new blueprint for society. This new system would protect the spiritual and moral authority of the church, while also addressing some of the grievances which had driven people away from it. *Rerum Novarum* almost singlehandedly created the discipline of Catholic social teaching, and sparked a wave of attempts by Catholic intellectuals to apply Catholic doctrines to social questions. In 1931, Pope Pius XI commemorated *Rerum Novarum* and expanded upon its themes in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, or the "Fortieth Year." The end of World War I, the Great Depression, and the rise of Fascism had all created new problems that demanded solutions from Catholic intellectuals. *Quadragesimo Anno* also discusses the reception of *Rerum Novarum*, especially the disagreements it had caused within the Church.

Together, these two encyclicals outline a distinct worldview, one that is reflected to varying degrees in the writings and speeches of Charles Coughlin and John Ryan. The new Catholic worldview centered on several key ideas, most importantly respect for private property, respect for hierarchy, and emphasis on the family as the fundamental social unit. The authors cast this new system as a third way alternative to liberalism and socialism, though upon critical evaluation it appears to be more of a moderation of liberalism than a truly new ideology.

The encyclicals offered guidelines for governments to bring civil law into accord with these new Catholic principles. States must safeguard private property, but discourage concentrated ownership so that more workers could become landowners. They had a special duty to protect workers, since the poor had no other guardian besides the government. Crucially, the encyclicals supported a larger role for government in the economy, in contrast to the dominant system of laissez-faire. Though the Church remained wary of state intervention (especially in *Rerum Novarum*), they argued that governments should actively promote class cooperation and distributive justice. Distributive justice combined demands for a living wage, limits on working hours, and a ban on child labor with the preservation of the traditional family structure and attention to the spiritual needs of workers. The Church saw itself as the institution most suited to promoting class cooperation, since both owners and workers from various nations could unite around their common religion. *Quadragesimo Anno* gives a much more detailed plan for achieving this goal through

the creation of Catholic trade unions and other associations in which workers and employers could work together to mediate disputes.

Critical to the new system was the “inviolability of private property.”² In the Church’s view, property rights came from natural law, as exemplified by the Tenth Commandment’s prohibition of coveting thy neighbor’s goods.³ Moreover, the motivation for a man to engage in “remunerative labor” was to “obtain property, and thereafter hold it as his very own.”⁴ Wages, then, were a means of acquiring land and independence. Thus, the State “should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners.”⁵ *Quadragesimo Anno* went further by pointing out that since workers have nothing to offer but their labor, their wages formed their only source of gaining independence. Even if workers practiced thrift, as the Church advocated, they would never be able to buy land without sufficient wages.⁶ This led the authors to advocate strongly for higher wages for workers.

Both encyclicals make constant reference to “liberalism,” but are often deliberately vague about what that system entails. Different nations have always implemented liberal ideas in different ways, and all liberal systems underwent significant change between 1891 and 1931.⁷ Thus, the use of the same term for many different countries in both time periods becomes somewhat confusing. Fortunately,

² Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 15

³ *Ibid* 11

⁴ *Ibid* 5

⁵ *Ibid* 46

⁶ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 63

⁷ Michael Freeden. *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 14

the main grievances in both documents deal with certain common features of almost all liberalisms. Chief among these was individualism, which gave people too much freedom to choose immoral or non-sanctioned behavior. The encyclicals focused on the economic implications of this freedom, especially the concentration of wealth which they argued was the inevitable outcome of unregulated capitalism. They attributed this individualism to the ideology's Protestant heritage, and it is not hard to detect the old rivalries in Catholic attacks.⁸ Portraying society as a group of autonomous individuals also conflicted with the Church's emphasis on the family as the basic social unit. The heavy reliance on "rationality" also undermined certain Catholic teachings which were based on received doctrine and faith.⁹ Finally, the liberal idea of "progress" was anathema to the Church, which valued tradition. This idea of progress held that that human society would continue along a path, which was not predetermined, towards increasing individual freedom.¹⁰ The implication was that old, non-liberal institutions like the Catholic Church would disappear, which was obviously unacceptable to the Church hierarchy.

One of the most troubling outcomes of liberalism, in the eyes of the authors, was the concentration of huge wealth in the hands of a few. The encyclicals gave a direct response, both to the massive wealth disparities that existed in the late 19th century, as well as to critics who accused the Church of favoring the rich. Concentrated land ownership, and the retaining of most industrial profits by employers, prevented

⁸ Michael Freeden. *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 25

⁹ *Ibid* 61

¹⁰ *Ibid* 61

workers from becoming the small landowners the authors envisioned. The authors took an especially dim view of banking, which they saw as “covetous” and too often “rapacious.”¹¹ Furthermore, the disparities in wealth contradicted the Catholic assertion that the Earth had been granted to all mankind, and that every individual deserved “his own share of goods.”¹²

Concentrated wealth inevitably gave the wealthy disproportionate political influence, as noted in both encyclicals. *Rerum Novarum* notes that the wealthy exert undue influence in the “administration of the commonwealth,” while *Quadragesimo Anno* directly attacks this trend.¹³ The most egregious perpetrators of this “economic dictatorship” were “not owners but only the trustees and managing directors of invested funds” (i.e. bankers and financiers).¹⁴ These powerful interests used their economic power to “gain supremacy over the State” and use its resources to further enrich themselves.¹⁵ Once this had been accomplished, they used their power to engineer conflicts between States, again in pursuit of expanding markets and profits.¹⁶ This was merely the “unlimited freedom of struggle” of liberalism taken to its logical end.¹⁷ The Church had a long tradition of hostility towards banking, and in their eyes the horrors of World War I had confirmed their suspicions about its dangers. The more open hostility to international finance in *Quadragesimo Anno* likely stems from the

¹¹ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 2

¹² Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 58

¹³ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 47

¹⁴ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 105

¹⁵ *Ibid* 108

¹⁶ *Ibid* 108

¹⁷ *Ibid* 107

authors' belief that international bankers had caused World War I, a popular theory at that time. To combat this disparity in political power, the authors argued that the State should bring "private ownership into harmony with the needs of the common good," seemingly a call for redistribution of wealth or land.¹⁸ The fact that they felt the need to add an assurance that this would not constitute a "hostile act against private owners" seems to indicate that they understood the gravity of their suggestion.¹⁹ In their view, redistribution of property would "preven[t] the private possession of goods" which were essential "the support of human life."²⁰ Only such a radical change could prevent the current system "from causing intolerable evils and thus rushing to its own destruction."²¹

For all of its time spent critiquing liberalism, the Church clearly saw that ideology, and the capitalist economy, as preferable to socialism. *Quadragesimo Anno* made clear that the goal of *Rerum Novarum* had not been to overthrow capitalism, but to "adjust" it to "the norms of right order."²² *QA*, especially, uses strong rhetoric when attacking capitalism and liberalism, but upon deeper analysis, is still moderate in its aims.

Both encyclicals portray socialism as the latest in a long line of villains seeking to tempt faithful Catholics.²³ Especially before *Rerum Novarum* softened the Church's position on organized labor, many Catholic workers defected to socialist unions, who

¹⁸ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 49

¹⁹ *Ibid* 49

²⁰ *Ibid* 49

²¹ *Ibid* 49

²² *Ibid* 101

²³ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 2

they saw as their only advocates.²⁴ Even after it softened its economic positions, the Church still had fundamental disagreements with socialism. Socialists, by abolishing private property, “would deprive [the working man] of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life.”²⁵ Moreover, abolishing private property, along with all other forms of class distinction, would destroy the hierarchy the authors saw as natural. With respect to family and religion, the Church feared socialism even more than liberalism. Socialists openly rejected both Christianity and “bourgeois marriage,” and these two encyclicals were just as much a response to socialists as to liberals. Abolishing private property would prevent fathers from providing their children with an inheritance, while ending traditional marriage would upend the social relations the authors held dear.²⁶ Furthermore, socialists supported state-run public education, which would threaten the system of parochial schools that existed at that time. Though this issue does not receive much attention in the encyclicals, schools became one of the main battlegrounds between Catholics and secular governments in the late 19th and 20th centuries.²⁷ It is no surprise, then, that the authors called for the “authority of the law” to clamp down upon socialist “firebrands, to save the working classes from being led astray by their maneuvers.”²⁸

²⁴ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 4, 36; Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 30-31, 55

²⁵ *Ibid* 2, 15

²⁶ *Ibid* 14

²⁷ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 114, 147

²⁸ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 36

The Church argued that both laissez-faire capitalism and socialism inspired class conflict--socialism through its rhetoric and capitalism through its exploitation of workers--and sought instead to promote class cooperation. The encyclicals include guidelines for both workers and employers, which conformed to the new concept of distributive justice.²⁹ This new justice would take into account not just the material condition of workers, but also the "social character" of work and ownership.³⁰ It required employers to respect the human rights of their workers, rather than viewing them as a means to an economic end.³¹

In laying down the duties of employers, the authors focused primarily on wages and working hours. Providing a living wage to male workers enabled them to be sole providers for their families, so that their wives and children could stay home. Higher wages would also allow thrifty workers to save money towards buying land and providing inheritance, further stabilizing the family. Long working hours kept men away from home, while low wages meant that their wives and children often had to work equally long and hard. This situation inevitably "create[d] obstacles to the family bond and normal family life."³² Even more troubling, these conditions prevented workers from devoting time to religion.³³ The authors viewed religion, rather than the pursuit of material wealth, as life's primary purpose.³⁴ Consequently, employers had

²⁹ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 33

³⁰ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 45-47

³¹ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 20, 42; Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 101

³² Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 135

³³ *Ibid* 130

³⁴ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 21, 40, 57

to consider a worker's family when setting wages, and his soul when setting his hours.³⁵ Most importantly, these measures would make the working class, on the whole, less desperate, reducing the appeal of socialism and preventing a violent overthrow of the existing hierarchy.

The encyclicals placed much more stringent demands on workers than on employers. Workers were "never to injure the property, nor to outrage the person, of an employer."³⁶ In practical terms, this meant a ban on strikes. Furthermore, they were "never to resort to violence in defending their own cause," ruling out most other forms of direct action.³⁷ In keeping with these rules, workers could "have nothing to do with men of evil principles," a thinly veiled reference to socialists.³⁸ Without the ability to strike, workers in this system would have to rely on other entities to act on their behalf.

To replace the need for strikes and other activities that led to class antagonism, the authors proposed the formation of Catholic trade unions, and of "mutual associations" in which workers and employers could resolve their disputes.³⁹ Behind the Church's seemingly universal support for the rights of citizens to organize lay its desire to safeguard its own organizations and confraternities, which had had their existence suppressed and property confiscated by civil governments.⁴⁰ They did not

³⁵ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 20, 41

³⁶ *Ibid* 20

³⁷ *Ibid* 20

³⁸ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 20

³⁹ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 31; Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 58

⁴⁰ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 53, 55

extend this privilege to socialist groups, and had no qualms about calling for the suppression of socialist unions and associations.⁴¹ In the years between 1891 and 1931, many Catholic trade unions and political associations did spring up across Europe, and to some extent in America.⁴² Similar organizations on the employer side, and mutual associations for workers and employers, remained absent, except in fascist countries.⁴³

The desire for a new system led to a complicated relationship between the Church and fascism, especially in Italy. In its rhetoric, at least, Mussolini's government sought to promote class cooperation through the use of syndicates and corporations, which bore a surface-level resemblance to the mutual associations of the encyclicals. *Quadragesimo Anno* devotes several sections to an evaluation of Italian fascism, and concludes that although it had some "obvious advantages...it rather serve[d] particular political ends than leads to the reconstruction and promotion of a better social order."⁴⁴ While it made a point to show its ambivalence toward the fascist regime, it implored Italian Catholics to participate in the system and bring it into accord with Catholic principles.⁴⁵

It is important to note that the geopolitical realities of 1931 also shaped this relationship. By that time, the Holy See had been reduced to a small enclave within Rome, and was geographically surrounded by Italy. It was almost certainly reluctant

⁴¹ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 95

⁴² *Ibid* 38; John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 138

⁴³ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 38

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 95

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 96

to offend the Italian government so soon after the signing of the 1929 Lateran Treaty, which had finally recognized the sovereignty of Vatican City after 50 years of uncertain status.⁴⁶

Though the encyclicals put forth an economic vision which, in a twentieth-century American context, would almost certainly be called socially liberal, their ideas about family and society remained staunchly conservative. The authors generally supported preserving existing family structures and relations. Their vision of family was firmly patriarchal, in which a man ruled over the “society” of his house as a king ruled a state, or as God ruled the world.⁴⁷ A man’s authority over his family could be neither abolished nor absorbed by the State,” since as a divinely sanctioned institution, family preceded the state.⁴⁸

The idea of family in the encyclicals was inextricably linked to private property. The right of ownership in the new social order would only “belong to a man in his capacity of head of a family.”⁴⁹ Fathers had a duty to provide for their wives and children, and to do whatever they could to provide for his children’s futures through inheritance.⁵⁰ This inheritance could only come in the form of private property passed from father to son, so private property was critical to the stability and continuity of families.⁵¹

⁴⁶ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 172

⁴⁷ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 12, 14

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 14, 35

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 13

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 13

⁵¹ *Ibid* 13

The sections on family make it quite clear that the authors wanted higher wages for men so that their wives and children could remain at home. Besides the fact that women were “by nature fitted for home-work,” the factory environment contained myriad threats to their “modesty.”⁵² Children too, were to be sheltered “until their bodies and minds are sufficiently developed.”⁵³ *Quadragesimo Anno* argues that if a man’s wages did not allow him to provide for his family (with sufficient thrift on his part), “social justice demands” that they be raised.⁵⁴ In this way, the authors came to support a seemingly progressive position using a very conservative justification.

Much like the hierarchy within a traditional family, all of society in this new system would conform to what the authors saw as a natural hierarchy. Differences in “capacity, skill, health, strength” necessarily led to “unequal fortune[s]” among people.⁵⁵ Since God had created all people with these differences, he thus intended for each person to play a particular part in society.⁵⁶ The goal, then, of the measures proposed by the encyclicals was not to overturn any hierarchies but merely to alleviate the worst suffering of working people.

The arguments regarding property, family, and the state in the encyclicals constitute a fairly coherent system on paper. Due to the international presence of the Catholic Church, these ideas quickly spread around the globe and took on slight variations in each country. Charles Coughlin and John Ryan were two of the most

⁵² Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 42; Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 135

⁵³ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 42

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 46; Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 71

⁵⁵ Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 17

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 17

prominent disciples of the American school of Catholic social teaching. Though Ryan began his career about a decade earlier than Coughlin, they both became especially prominent in the 1930s, when the Great Depression stimulated the search for reforms. The release of *Quadragesimo Anno* early in the Depression sparked a new wave of interest in Catholic thought. Its attacks on laissez-faire capitalism coincided with the American public's growing dissatisfaction with President Hoover's "rugged individualism." The timeliness of that encyclical helped legitimate the Catholic perspective on economics, in a country where Catholics had historically faced varying levels of discrimination. The work of John Ryan between 1906 and 1931 had likely done even more to enhance the Catholic reputation. His work on traditionally Progressive causes like the minimum wage and child labor helped dispel some of the stereotypes of the reactionary Catholic. Ryan's positive public image and his penchant for interfaith outreach made him a popular figure by the 1930s, and certainly improved the image of the Church. Coughlin's attacks on Hoover and Wall Street, popular villains of the Depression, initially made him a popular figure. His turn to isolationism and anti-Semitism after 1936, however, made him infamous and certainly did not help the reputation of the Church in America.

Though Coughlin and Ryan started the 1930s with a fair amount of intellectual commonality, personal and political events caused their paths to diverge. Since Ryan had already spent over a decade applying Catholic social teaching to American problems, Coughlin inevitably built on Ryan's foundation to some extent. Coughlin's other influences, and his belligerent personality, led him to some different conclusions

and gave his work a much more polemical tone. The content, however, was largely similar to Ryan's until Coughlin's dispute with Roosevelt caused him to break away. This dispute owed as much to Roosevelt's personal rejection of Coughlin as it did with Coughlin's frustration with the president's gradualist approach.⁵⁷ In 1936, Coughlin formally broke with Roosevelt and publicly criticized Msgr. Ryan. The heated exchange between the two clerics garnered the attention of both Catholics and non-Catholics, and brought Catholic views to the forefront of the 1936 election debate.

⁵⁷ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 139

CHAPTER TWO: Radio Priest vs. Right Reverend

Following the release of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, Catholic intellectuals in different countries attempted to implement the principles of those documents in their own unique societies. Father Charles Coughlin and Monsignor John Ryan were two of the most prominent examples of this effort in American in the 1930s. Their paths, and their eventual clash, help illustrate two popular iterations of Catholic social teaching in an American context.

In recent decades, scholars of Catholic history have devoted much attention to the “broad trend of self-marginalization in Catholic historiography” that has led to some deficiency in studies of Catholic individuals and groups by non-Catholic historians.¹ Leslie Tentler, one of the first historians to call attention to this, claims that despite this recognition, “American Catholic history is in some important ways still essentially ghettoized.”² This likely explains why John Ryan has received so little attention from non-Catholic historians, despite being one the first major figures in the American living wage movement.³ Though Charles Coughlin has received a great deal of scholarly attention, he has mostly been viewed as an extension of the Populist tradition, or simply as a radical demagogue. Even Alan Brinkley, who authored what is possibly the most even-handed recent biography of Coughlin, attributes Coughlin’s

¹ Murphy. “An ‘Indestructible Right’: John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906-1938.” 64

² Tentler. “On the Margins: The State of American Catholic History.” 78

³ See Laura Murphy. “An ‘Indestructible Right’: John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938.”

philosophy and its overlap with American Populism as the result of "related populist sentiments that were emerging in other societies."⁴ By this he almost certainly refers to the Catholic social teaching that had exploded in Europe following the release of *Rerum Novarum*. Unfortunately, he devotes little attention to the encyclicals or to the Catholic origins of Coughlin's ideology. Brinkley is not alone, as most later commentators, and especially the most recent ones who have tried to draw parallels between Coughlin and Donald Trump, tend to ignore Coughlin's Catholicism entirely. It is my hope that my examination of Coughlin in a Catholic context will add further depth to the portrait of him that exists in mainstream historiography, and that it will bring Ryan further out of the shadows towards some well-deserved attention.

The importance of Catholics as a Democratic Party voting bloc made the opinions of Coughlin and Ryan - popular figures within that community - politically important. Catholics were the "single largest denomination in the country" (though not a majority of the population) and had been a critical Democratic constituency since the 19th century.⁵ This helps explain why the Roosevelt administration cultivated both of their support, then later tried to undermine Coughlin's attempts to gain more influence.⁶ The central role of Catholics in the northern Democratic Party began as early as the mid-19th century, following a wave of Catholic immigration from Europe.⁷

⁴ Brinkley. "Comparative Biography as Political History: Huey Long and Father Coughlin." 12

⁵ Tentler. "On the Margins: The State of American Catholic History." 78

⁶ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 139

⁷ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 92. The southern Democratic Party remained the party of White Protestants and focused primarily on preserving racial segregation.

McGreevy argues that the power of Catholics within the Democratic Party partially explains why no Catholic political parties ever formed in America, as they had in Europe.⁸ Franklin Roosevelt's actions make clear that he recognized the importance of Catholic votes and Catholic celebrities like Coughlin and Ryan. At a Roosevelt campaign stop in Detroit in 1932, Coughlin praised the recently released *Quadragesimo Anno* and said it was "just as radical as I am."⁹ Note that Coughlin was the parish priest of nearby Royal Oak and had a large following in Detroit. In that same year, Coughlin attended the 1932 DNC and "worked quietly" for Roosevelt.¹⁰ In recognition of this and many other similar actions, the Catholic University of America awarded him an honorary degree in 1933.¹¹

John Ryan was born in 1869 on a farm outside of St. Paul, Minnesota to a family of Irish immigrants.¹² As a young man, he moved to St. Paul proper to attend the Christian Brothers' School, then the St. Thomas Seminary.¹³ Early readings on the Irish freedom struggle and the philosophy of Henry George sparked his interest in "economic justice."¹⁴ Ryan subsequently came under the influence of the Farmers' Alliance and Populist movements ("Populist" referring to the People's Party of the 1890s), which were prevalent in Minnesota at that time.¹⁵ Coughlin, though born over twenty years later, shared this admiration for Populism. A teenaged Ryan would walk

⁸ *Ibid* 110

⁹ *Ibid* 151

¹⁰ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 108

¹¹ Francis Broderick. *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan*. (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

¹² John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 1

¹³ *Ibid* 7

¹⁴ *Ibid* 7-9

¹⁵ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 13, 44

across the city to hear Ignatius Donnelly, a Catholic who later wrote the preamble to the 1892 Omaha Platform of the People's Party, speak in the Minnesota legislature.¹⁶ From the Populists he absorbed a hostility towards concentrated wealth in general, a belief which only later became part of Catholic social thought.¹⁷

The role of American Populism in shaping the thought of Coughlin and Ryan is worthy of special attention. Both ideologies attacked concentrated wealth, and the Populist ideal of the small, independent landowner sounds very much like the one put forth in *Rerum Novarum*. Both Coughlin and Ryan showed signs of Populist influence in their writings, most clearly by espousing the Populist argument that monetizing silver would help farmers and workers.¹⁸ Ryan specifically mentioned William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold Speech" as an early influence, and Coughlin quoted this speech in a number of sermons.¹⁹

Both men clearly admired the spirit of Populism, despite the prevalence of anti-Catholic conspiracy theories among its members.²⁰ McGreevy argues that "Catholicism was "never a dominant theme" of the movement, but was merely present in some of its members.²¹ Jeffrey Ostler, in his examination of Populism, argues that "many proponents of" that movement "employed conspiratorial rhetoric" to galvanize support

¹⁶ *Ibid* 12-13

¹⁷ *Ibid* 12-13, 17

¹⁸ Charles E. Coughlin. "The Call to Arms!" (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 6, 10; John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 56; Charles E. Coughlin. *Driving out the Money Changers*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 67

¹⁹ Charles E. Coughlin. *Driving out the Money Changers*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 67, 68; John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 56; Charles E. Coughlin. "The Call to Arms!" (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 2

²⁰ Jeffrey Ostler. "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism." (*Agricultural History* 69, no. 1, 1995).

²¹ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 125

for their political efforts.²² Rather than being an exception, this actually formed part of a long tradition of American conspiracy theories, dating back to Revolution-era suspicion of the English and pre-Civil War fears of "Slave Power."²³ The most prevalent of the Populist conspiracies involved "English capitalists" limiting the money supply to deprive ordinary Americans of their economic liberty.²⁴ This narrative appealed to a larger suspicion of wealthy, international groups and individuals who seemed to exercise undue power. That line of thinking led some members to view the Catholic church in a similar light, and may have been linked to earlier anti-Papist conspiracy theories among the Know Nothings of the 1840s-1850s.²⁵ Interestingly, though Coughlin obviously never subscribed to the anti-Papal narratives, he made conspiracies about international bankers and gold-backed currency a central part of his radio broadcasts.²⁶ Again, since concerns about international finance subverting national sovereignty appear in *Quadragesimo Anno*, it is impossible to say whether Coughlin's beliefs came from one or the other.²⁷

While at seminary, Ryan came under the influence and often direct supervision of Archbishop John Ireland, one of the most prominent Catholic reformers at that time.²⁸ After advising Ryan for most of his studies, the archbishop appointed him to a

²² Jeffrey Ostler. "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism." (*Agricultural History* 69, no. 1, 1995). 4

²³ *Ibid* 3

²⁴ *Ibid* 1, 8

²⁵ *Ibid* 3

²⁶ Charles E. Coughlin. *The Call to Arms!* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 2, 6; Coughlin also refers to the Slave Power Conspiracy in Charles E. Coughlin. *The New Deal in Money*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 73

²⁷ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 105-109

²⁸ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 21

professorship at the seminary.²⁹ Ireland had earlier gained fame and notoriety for arguing for the "compatibility of Catholic doctrine and institutions with a republican form of government," as well as full equality for African-Americans.³⁰ Much of Ireland's philosophy came from direct contact with European Catholic thinkers, at the forefront of what was then the new discipline of Catholic Social Thought.³¹ Ryan himself was also fluent in several languages and was quite familiar with many of these European thinkers.³² Though they disagreed on some issues, several of Ireland's ideas later became central to Ryan's thinking. Ryan vocally supported the compatibility of Catholicism and nationalism.³³ From Ireland, he also gained the conviction that "political democracy and industrial autocracy" were incompatible.³⁴ Laura Murphy, in her examination argues that Ryan's simultaneous support for "individual rights" and wariness towards "individualism" represent this fusion of "Catholic and American traditions."³⁵ Though this is certainly true - Ryan often argued explicitly that these two traditions were compatible³⁶ - the tension between those two ideas is also very visible in the encyclicals. The idea of the two-fold character of ownership, as well as the

²⁹ *Ibid* 21

³⁰ *Ibid* 22; John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 120

³¹ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 120

³² *Ibid* 142

³³ *Ibid* 22; John A. Ryan. *American Democracy vs. Racism, Communism*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1941).

³⁴ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 22

³⁵ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 72

³⁶ John A. Ryan. *American Democracy vs. Racism, Communism*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1941).

different guidelines for the ownership and the use of property, show a similar desire to balance property rights and individualism.³⁷

As an activist, Ryan made his name as a leading figure in the living wage movement. Ryan's doctoral dissertation, which he later expanded into his first book in 1906, was the first English-language book arguing for a living wage.³⁸ In it, he argued that a just wage should take into account all of the needs of the worker and his family, not simply the value of his labor in the eyes of the employer. Ryan's career started over two decades before the release of *Quadragesimo Anno*, so his views were shaped much more by *Rerum Novarum*. This may partially explain why he focused on areas such as wages, working conditions, and child labor, all of which feature most prominently in *Rerum Novarum*. He especially subscribed to the logic put forth in that encyclical that a man should receive a living wage so that his wife and children did not have to work.³⁹ This justification clearly shows the influence of Catholic tradition on Ryan's reform efforts.

Despite his clearly expressed adherence to Catholic tradition, a defining theme of Ryan's career was his ability to work with, and influence, non-Catholic reformers. The Protestant intellectual Richard T. Ely, whom Ryan cited as an early influence, helped him secure a publisher for *A Living Wage* and corresponded with him

³⁷ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 45-50; Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 22

³⁸ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 63; John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 82; Ryan's dissertation was entitled *A Living Wage*.

³⁹ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 74

throughout his life.⁴⁰ In 1909, Ryan began working with the National Consumers League to promote national minimum wage legislation, and he formed a lasting relationship with the leader of that group, Florence Kelley.⁴¹ His activism slowly began to pay off in the form of legislation, though many early minimum wage laws quickly fell victim to legal challenges.⁴² Ryan wrote the first minimum wage law in his home state of Minnesota, but it applied only to female and child laborers.⁴³ His first taste of government came from serving on the state's Minimum Wage Commission that this law created.⁴⁴ The Minnesota law inspired similar efforts in other states, but most were unsuccessful.⁴⁵ Despite their failure, these efforts did spread the idea of a minimum wage, particularly among Progressive reformers. Ryan's ideas reached New York, where state senator (and future president) Franklin Roosevelt and his future Labor Secretary Frances Perkins were leading the Progressive reaction to the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 143; John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 80

⁴¹ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 65, 76

⁴² Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 8. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established the first federal minimum wage.

⁴³ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 65, 78

⁴⁴ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 78-79

⁴⁵ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 79-80

⁴⁶ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 83-84

Charles Coughlin was born in 1891, over 20 years after John Ryan, in Hamilton, Ontario, to an American father and Canadian mother, both of Irish Catholic descent.⁴⁷ After attending Catholic schools in Ontario, he joined the priesthood. At seminary, he focused on some of the same subjects that Ryan had, moral theology and industrial issues.⁴⁸ It was at seminary that he first heard *Rerum Novarum*, and it strongly influenced him just as it had Ryan. Following his ordination in 1916, he began teaching at a Catholic school while also traveling to Detroit to give sermons.⁴⁹ In 1926, he was assigned full-time to the small new church in Royal Oak, Michigan, where he defied the local Ku Klux Klan and built the parish into one of the largest in Michigan.⁵⁰ His archbishop had named the church after a recently canonized nun, St. Theresa of the Little Flower, and so when Coughlin tried using a weekly radio program to boost attendance, he named it the *Golden Hour of the Little Flower*.⁵¹ Though this program would later make Coughlin a national figure, its first episodes were merely generic Catholic sermons and messages to children.⁵² It was only in 1930, as the stock market crash began evolving into the Great Depression, that the content turned to economics and current events.⁵³ These broadcasts attracted a large audience, particularly for their heated attacks on bankers and the Hoover administration, both popular villains

⁴⁷ Ronald H. Carpenter. *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998). 28

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 30

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 30

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 30-31

⁵¹ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 97; Ronald H. Carpenter. *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998). 31

⁵² Ronald H. Carpenter. *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998). 31-32

⁵³ *Ibid* 32

at that time. Many of Coughlin's arguments came straight from papal encyclicals, and he often promoted *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* on the air.⁵⁴ As he became more controversial, the major radio networks gradually pushed him out, and he had to set up an independent network in 1931.⁵⁵ It was around this time that he became a nationally known figure both among Catholics and non-Catholics.

Though the condemnation of international finance made up a relatively small part of the encyclicals, it gradually became the focus of Coughlin's broadcasts. His denunciations found an enthusiastic audience in an American public feeling the strain of the Depression and looking for a scapegoat. Ryan, for his part, also condemned concentrated wealth, but never to the extent that Coughlin did, and never in such inflammatory terms as Coughlin used. In keeping with the spirit of the encyclicals, Coughlin stressed that capitalism was not inherently evil and that the enemies of the working class were not employers or factory owners, since this would have promoted class conflict.⁵⁶ Instead, the true villains were wealthy financiers, especially international bankers, at whom he directed a constant stream of vitriol.⁵⁷ Depending on the week, he labelled them despots, "modern pagans," and (somewhat

⁵⁴ Charles Coughlin. *"By the Sweat of Thy Brow."* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1931).

⁵⁵ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 101

⁵⁶ Charles E. Coughlin. "The Call to Arms!" (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 3; Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 150

⁵⁷ *Ibid* 148, 150; Charles E. Coughlin. "The Call to Arms!" (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 3

confusingly) communists.⁵⁸ He often compared them to Confederate slaveholders, the biblical “money changers,” and the high priests who had conspired against Jesus.⁵⁹ Echoing the encyclicals, he claimed bankers had turned governments into “their craven servant[s],” and went even further by accusing them of starting World War I.⁶⁰

Coughlin’s views on banking and communism were complex and somewhat idiosyncratic. His line of reasoning often went that by depriving the majority of people of their material necessities, they drove people towards communism.⁶¹ He often echoed the vision of society presented in the encyclicals, casting communism and laissez-faire liberalism as the two enemies attacking the masses of innocent people from either end of the ideological spectrum. Much as it did for the authors of the encyclicals, this rhetorical technique positioned him as the proponent of a third way between two undesirable extremes.

Coughlin’s emphasis on the evils of international finance gradually led him towards an existing body of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, for which he would become infamous in his later years. This body of theories encompassed narratives

⁵⁸ Charles E. Coughlin. *Driving out the Money Changers*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 63, 67, 71; Charles E. Coughlin. *The New Deal in Money*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 73, 76

⁵⁹ Charles E. Coughlin. *Driving out the Money Changers*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 63, 67, 71; Charles E. Coughlin. *The New Deal in Money*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 73, 76

⁶⁰ Charles E. Coughlin. *The New Deal in Money*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 79; Charles E. Coughlin. *The Call to Arms!* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 1

⁶¹ See Charles Coughlin. “*By the Sweat of Thy Brow.*” (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1931) 105, 110; Charles Coughlin. *The National Union for Social Justice: Lecture*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1934); and Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor*. (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 10 for examples.

about a cabal of international Jewish bankers, with the Rothschild family often used as a stand-in, to the supposedly Jewish origins of Bolshevism in Russia.⁶² These contradictory and chimerical narratives often led Coughlin into strange ideological contortions in his later sermons, wherein he portrayed international bankers working with communist revolutionaries, in furtherance of some mysterious Jewish agenda.⁶³ His descent into barely veiled anti-Semitism inspired a public backlash and largely discredited him. When members of the Christian Front, a reactionary anti-Semitic group that cited Coughlin as its inspiration, were caught stealing rifles from an armory, the public began to view Coughlin as an agent of fascism.⁶⁴ His isolationism, which he justified by claiming the World Wars were Rothschild schemes, made him seem even more suspicious.⁶⁵ Once the US had formally entered World War II, Coughlin became a threat to the war effort, and the administration finally convinced the church hierarchy to force Coughlin off the air in 1942.

Coughlin's broadcasts did not, however, consist solely of conspiracy theories and bigotry. Indeed, in his first years he was a popular figure within the bounds of the mainstream and Catholic social teaching. Alan Brinkley argues in his examination of Coughlin that until recently, his later extremism had "tended to obscure and distort a larger political significance."⁶⁶ In addition to attacks on concentrated wealth, he

⁶² Charles E. Coughlin. *Ten Million Unemployed*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1939). 8; Charles E. Coughlin. *Persecution, Jewish and Christian*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1938); Charles E. Coughlin. *The Call to Arms!* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933).

⁶³ Charles E. Coughlin. *Persecution, Jewish and Christian*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1938).

⁶⁴ JoEllen McNergney Vinyard. *Right in Michigan's Grassroots*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011). 167; Charles E. Coughlin. *I Take My Stand*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1940).

⁶⁵ Charles E. Coughlin. *The Call to Arms!* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 1

⁶⁶ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). x

vocally supported a legally enforced living wage for all workers, and more generally supported government intervention to combat poverty.⁶⁷ He often cited the encyclicals in support of these goals, and sometimes reinterpreted bible passages and traditional prayers for this purpose.⁶⁸ Even in Coughlin's later attacks on Ryan, he cannot help but praise the latter's earlier efforts in this area.⁶⁹

Before 1934, Coughlin chose, as Ryan did, to embrace the New Deal as the best hope for infusing social justice into American society. Barely a week after Roosevelt's first inauguration, Coughlin declared that "financial slavery [had] come to an end."⁷⁰ In the same broadcast, he called on his listeners to tune in later that night for Roosevelt's first fireside chat.⁷¹ By 1934, as Roosevelt's efforts ran into legal obstacles and progress slowed, Coughlin defended him and shifted blame to a corrupt system, calling him "your peerless leader who is harassed both from within and without."⁷² In keeping with his rhetorical style, he argued that Roosevelt was the last hope for America. The choices were, quite simply, "Roosevelt or ruin."⁷³

This enthusiasm would not last, as the pace of political reform inevitably proved too slow for a polemicist like Coughlin. Brinkley identifies 1934 as the year where

⁶⁷ Charles Coughlin. *By the Sweat of Thy Brow.* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1931). 114

⁶⁸ Charles Coughlin. *By the Sweat of Thy Brow.* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1931). 114. Here he uses the "daily bread" clause from the Lord's Prayer to justify a living wage.

⁶⁹ Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor.* (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 10

⁷⁰ Charles E. Coughlin. *The New Deal in Money.* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 76

⁷¹ *Ibid* 82

⁷² Charles E. Coughlin. *The Call to Arms!* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933). 11

⁷³ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). Chapter 7

Coughlin first showed signs of breaking away.⁷⁴ The clearest of these was his formation of an independent organization, the National Union for Social Justice, in 1934 to spread his ideology nationwide.⁷⁵ In a radio broadcast announcing the new group, he listed 16 guiding principles of “social justice,” a term used often in the encyclicals and Catholic social teaching more generally.⁷⁶ We can take this list as the best indication of Coughlin’s beliefs at that point in his career. The principles show a unique fusion of Catholic social teaching, Populism, and Coughlin’s own idiosyncratic views about banking. Second on the list is a “just, living, annual wage” for all male workers, taking into account the needs of his family.⁷⁷ Recall that this exact line of reasoning appears in the encyclicals and in Ryan’s writings. It is clear from this and other writings that Coughlin and Ryan completely agreed, at least in theory, on the issue of a living wage. Numbers four and five show more Catholic influence. Here Coughlin asserts the right of private property, but with the condition that its use must serve the “public good.”⁷⁸ Here we see the twofold character of ownership present especially in *Quadragesimo Anno*. Also present is a call for the nationalization of “public resources which by their very nature are too important to be held in the control of private individuals.” In this context, he almost certainly refers to utilities, which Ryan also argued should be nationalized.⁷⁹ Both Coughlin and Ryan express more

⁷⁴ *Ibid* 124

⁷⁵ Charles Coughlin. *The National Union for Social Justice: Lecture*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1934).

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 11

⁷⁷ *Ibid* 11

⁷⁸ *Ibid* 11

⁷⁹ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 228

support for state action than generally appears in the encyclicals, though *Quadragesimo Anno* gives a fair amount of latitude. Several principles show Populist influence, such as calls to ban “tax-exempt bonds” and to guarantee to farmers “cost of production plus a fair profit.”⁸⁰ Bonds were a frequent target of Coughlin’s sermons, since they disproportionately benefitted rich speculators.⁸¹ His call to abolish the Federal Reserve also reflected his unique, and often conspiratorial, banking views.⁸² The final principle perhaps most clearly embodies the attitudes of Catholic social teaching. It states that “the sanctity of human rights” must take precedent over “the sanctity of property rights,” something which Coughlin had argued in many sermons.⁸³

Though Ryan grew to become one of Roosevelt’s most prominent and enduring supporters within the Catholic community, he had some initial doubts about Roosevelt’s commitment to social justice.⁸⁴ Francis Broderick, a biographer of Ryan, writes that in a 1934 essay in the prominent Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, entitled the “New Deal and Social Justice,” Ryan came within a hair of equating the two.⁸⁵ In that essay, he also portrayed the New Deal system as a middle way between capitalism and communism, much as the encyclicals portrayed their own system.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Charles Coughlin. *The National Union for Social Justice: Lecture*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1934). 11

⁸¹ Charles Coughlin. *“By the Sweat of Thy Brow.”* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1931). 121

⁸² Charles Coughlin. *The National Union for Social Justice: Lecture*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1934). 11

⁸³ Charles E. Coughlin. *Ten Million Unemployed*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1939). 5; Charles Coughlin. *“By the Sweat of Thy Brow.”* (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1931). 13

⁸⁴ Francis Broderick. *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan*. (New York: Macmillan, 1963). 217

⁸⁵ *Ibid* 216

⁸⁶ *Ibid* 216

Ryan's only real criticism seems to have been that the New Deal did not go "far enough" in its efforts to help the poor.⁸⁷

Of all the New Deal programs, Ryan cited the National Recovery Administration as his favorite.⁸⁸ Though none of the programs seem to have been inspired by Catholic social teaching, the NRA bore the most resemblance to the "associations" for workers and employers outlined in the encyclicals.⁸⁹ Its goal, to establish industry codes so that businesses would operate based on fairness rather than pure competition, fit with the goals of that envisioned Catholic system.⁹⁰ It should come as no surprise then, that when the NRA formed a three-man Industrial Appeals Board to review complaints about the new codes, John Ryan was one of its members.⁹¹ This was not to last, however, as the NRA fell victim to a court challenge in 1935, less than two years after being passed.⁹² Throughout Ryan's tenure, critics had contended that the IAB discriminated against small businesses, which Ryan strenuously denied.⁹³ The failure of the NRA did not shake Ryan's confidence in the New Deal as a whole. About a year later, he would put forth his strongest defense yet of the New Deal and its architect.

⁸⁷ Murphy. "An 'Indestructible Right': John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938." 83

⁸⁸ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 249

⁸⁹ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 29; Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 48; Francis Broderick. *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan*. (New York: Macmillan, 1963). 216

⁹⁰ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 88, 110; John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 249

⁹¹ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 249; John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 153

⁹² Schechter Poultry Corp v. United States <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/295/495/>

⁹³ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 250

Though he had been showing signs of drifting away from Roosevelt since 1934, when he founded his National Union for Social Justice, Coughlin still claimed to support the president for a time. Coughlin made his official break with Roosevelt on June 20, 1936, when he formed the Union Party, a third party to the left of the Democrats.⁹⁴ Coughlin formed an alliance with Francis Townsend, an early advocate government-funded old-age pensions, and Gerald L. K. Smith, the late Huey Long's second-in-command.⁹⁵ None of these three men ran for office and instead ran a handful of local candidates and nominated Rep. William Lemke of North Dakota for the presidential race.⁹⁶ The group then toured the country giving speeches critical of Roosevelt and the New Deal, trying to pull enough supporters away from Roosevelt to spoil his chances.⁹⁷ They attacked Roosevelt for being too conservative in his policies, but at the same time, Coughlin confusingly tried to paint him as a communist. Coughlin used his radio platform to attack Roosevelt, and tried to mobilize the members of his National Union for Social Justice into a political movement. Thanks to Coughlin's public profile, the movement inevitably received a great deal of attention. The Catholic establishment, which had long held that priests must stay out of politics, denounced his involvement in the party.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Larry Sabato and Howard Ernst. *Encyclopedia of American Political Parties and Elections*. (Infobase Publishing, 2014). 468

⁹⁵ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 255

⁹⁶ *Ibid* 254

⁹⁷ *Ibid* 175

⁹⁸ *Ibid* 258

By October, 1936, Ryan felt that he could no longer let Coughlin go unchallenged. With only a month left until the election, and with the entire New Deal project dependent on Roosevelt's reelection, the stakes were high. As he explained in a later letter, Ryan had even larger worries besides the potential failure of the New Deal. He worried that if Coughlin actually did cause Roosevelt's defeat, it would discredit the encyclicals and inspire a wave of anti-Catholic backlash from which they would never recover.⁹⁹ To show both Catholics and Protestants that Coughlin did not represent the official positions of the Church, he published a direct attack on Coughlin and his movement. Thanks to his fame and connections, his statement appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* and in many other publications.¹⁰⁰

Ryan vigorously defended Roosevelt and his associates from Coughlin's accusations of communism, and also sought prove that the New Deal was in harmony with Catholic social teaching. He pointed out that Roosevelt had explicitly rejected the support of any communists, and had even received an honorary degree from the Catholic University of America.¹⁰¹ Not only were Coughlin's accusations false, they and his claim that Roosevelt was "anti-God" violated the Eighth Commandment against false witness.¹⁰² Emphasizing his own seniority over Coughlin, Ryan also reminded readers that he himself had been accused of socialism many times for trying to help the poor.¹⁰³ Equally innocent were David Dubinsky, Felix Frankfurter, and Rexford

⁹⁹ John A. Ryan. *Seven Troubled Years*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1937). 300

¹⁰⁰ New York Times. "Mgr. Ryan Backs Roosevelt, Attacks Father Coughlin." (9 October, 1936)

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*

¹⁰² *Ibid*

¹⁰³ *Ibid*

Tugwell, who Coughlin had often charged with communist associations.¹⁰⁴ He defended the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which Coughlin demonized, and reasserted his faith in the New Deal as a whole.¹⁰⁵ He summed up his argument rather directly, stating that "...Father Coughlin's explanation of our economic maladies is at least 50 per cent wrong, and that his monetary remedies are at least 90 per cent wrong."¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Coughlin's ideas had "no support in the encyclicals of either Pope Leo XIII or Pope Pius XI" and were inconsistent with Catholic social thought.¹⁰⁷ He ended what was already an inflammatory letter with an even more controversial endorsement for the election of Roosevelt, and of several congressional candidates running against Coughlin's Union Party.¹⁰⁸ Though priests were generally expected not to involve themselves in politics, the desperate circumstances and Coughlin's own disregard for this rule convinced Ryan that he needed to intervene.

Coughlin, in typical fashion, did not hold back in his rebuttal. Speaking in Baltimore at a Union Party rally which was then broadcast over the radio, he tried to cast Ryan as a paid Democratic stooge out of sync with Catholic social teaching.¹⁰⁹ He attempted to walk back his original statements, claiming that he had used the word "Communitic," not that he had implied that Roosevelt was a card-carrying member

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁵ Francis Broderick. *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan*. (New York: Macmillan, 1963). 212-213

¹⁰⁶ New York Times. "Mgr. Ryan Backs Roosevelt, Attacks Father Coughlin." (9 October, 1936)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁹ Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor*. (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 1, 9

of the Communist Party.¹¹⁰ He still argued, however, that Roosevelt held some Communist "doctrines and theories."¹¹¹ He cited as evidence the charter for the Public Works Emergency Leasing Corporation, one of several holding corporations created to implement the New Deal. This entity had the power "'to acquire personal property of every kind, nature or description,' and 'in any manner to acquire, hold, use, or dispose of any franchises, licenses, grants, concessions, patents, trade marks, trade names, copyrights, or inventions granted by or existing under the laws of any government of subdivision thereof."¹¹² Coughlin claimed this would give the government the right to "Acquisition of private property by any means whatsoever," which would be the gateway to nationalization of property.¹¹³ He also identified the heads of these powerful corporations with the "trustees and managing directors" whom the authors of *Quadragesimo Anno* had criticized for holding undue power.¹¹⁴

Coughlin stood by his claims that Dubinsky and his other former targets had communist associations, and he levelled even harsher criticisms at the AAA.¹¹⁵ Not only had Roosevelt opposed the agency's current policy of destroying excess food during his first campaign, this practice contradicted Catholic doctrine.¹¹⁶ Destroying food while many Americans went hungry, regardless of its merit from a supply and

¹¹⁰ The New York Times. "COUGHLIN SAYS WORD WAS 'COMMUNISTIC.'" (9 October, 1936); Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor*. (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 1-2

¹¹¹ The New York Times. "COUGHLIN SAYS WORD WAS 'COMMUNISTIC.'" (9 October, 1936).

¹¹² Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor*. (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 4

¹¹³ *Ibid* 4

¹¹⁴ *Ibid* 8; Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 105

¹¹⁵ Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor*. (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 3, 6

¹¹⁶ *Ibid* 6

demand point of view, failed to satisfy the requirement of “distributive” justice emphasized in the encyclicals.¹¹⁷

Coughlin’s reply culminated in his charge that Ryan, out of either pragmatism or sycophancy, had abandoned Catholic principles and become a fanatical supporter of Roosevelt. Coughlin pointed to Ryan’s lack of criticism of Roosevelt’s passage of “a less than living wage for government laborers” as proof that he had betrayed his earlier commitment to social justice.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Ryan’s support for US entry into the League of Nations, which Coughlin saw as an agent of international bankers, proved that Ryan had sold out.¹¹⁹ Coughlin made sure to remind readers that he had supported many earlier New Deal programs.¹²⁰ According to him, his unwavering commitment to “the principles of social justice and of constitutional Americanism” prevented him from continuing to support Ryan or Roosevelt.¹²¹

In terms of public perception, Ryan seems to have come away from the confrontation the victor. Though he received hate mail from some of Coughlin’s most diehard followers, he received much more praise than criticism. Previously distressed Catholics, as well as many non-Catholic liberals, sent him letters thanking him for taking a stand.¹²² Ryan’s indictment of Coughlin appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*, while a short summary of Coughlin’s rebuttal was relegated to page

¹¹⁷ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1931). 5, 57; Pope Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1940). 33

¹¹⁸ Charles E. Coughlin. *Reply to a Right Reverend Monsignor*. (Royal Oak, MI: National Union for Social Justice, 1936). 2

¹¹⁹ *Ibid* 2

¹²⁰ *Ibid* 9

¹²¹ *Ibid* 9

¹²² John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 173;

18.¹²³ Coughlin and Ryan's exchange coincided with the visit of Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) to the United States¹²⁴ Though the cardinal refused to speak on the purpose of his visit, many speculated he had come to arrange a reprimand for Coughlin. Regardless of the intent, all Union Party candidates in New York quit their races the next day.¹²⁵ Coughlin continued to broadcast until the election, but contrary to his hopes, the Union Party won only 2% of the popular vote and no electors in the 1936 election.¹²⁶ Thus we can judge that Coughlin's political ambitions, and to a large extent his ideas, were rejected by the American public.

Though the main sources of the Union Party's failure were undoubtedly its lack of organization and the challenge of forming a third party in America, Roosevelt's popularity also played a part. Roosevelt's so-called "Second Hundred Days" in 1935 made him very popular, though "it represented little substantive change in policy" according to Brinkley.¹²⁷ This undercut his critics to the left, like Coughlin, who had been calling for more radical change. Furthermore, the WPA and earlier programs like the TVA were conspicuous efforts by the government to directly benefit ordinary Americans, so they convinced ordinary people that Roosevelt acted in their best interests.¹²⁸ Despite their overt appearance, "Many of the most important New Deal agencies were markedly decentralized in their operations, establishing broad policy

¹²³ The New York Times. "COUGHLIN SAYS WORD WAS 'COMMUNISTIC.'" (9 October, 1936).

¹²⁴ New York Times. "Mgr. Ryan Backs Roosevelt, Attacks Father Coughlin." (9 October, 1936)

¹²⁵ New York Times. "Coughlin's Ticket Quits in the State." (10 October, 1936).

¹²⁶ Larry Sabato and Howard Ernst. *Encyclopedia of American Political Parties and Elections*. (Infobase Publishing, 2014). 468

¹²⁷ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 247

¹²⁸ *Ibid* 247

directives in Washington, but leaving specific administrative decisions to local officials."¹²⁹ Brinkley adds that "The Roosevelt administration took care, moreover, to avoid involvement with issues particularly likely to inflame local sensibilities," a phenomenon that Ira Katznelson discusses with regard to racial segregation in his book *Fear Itself*.¹³⁰ This meant, in short, that the New Deal programs pleased far more people than they alienated, which solidified Roosevelt's popularity. Even with a better and more expansive effort, it is extremely unlikely that any third party could have unseated Roosevelt in 1936. Coughlin's defeat in the election devastated him, and his subsequent broadcasts clearly show signs of his descent into paranoia. As he had said in his reply to John Ryan, "It's up to me to prove he was communistic or else get out of the picture."¹³¹ Following his defeat, Coughlin announced his retirement from public life, then came back several months later.¹³² There would be several more periods of hiatus until his eventual retirement from broadcasting in 1942.

There is some debate over whether Ryan approved of the change of policy direction in Roosevelt's second term. According to McGreevy, Ryan was dismayed by the shift away from economic planning, as embodied by the NRA, towards efforts to "increase consumer buying power," which McGreevy identifies with Keynesianism.¹³³ Ryan apparently found this new approach overly materialistic and individualistic.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ *Ibid* 248

¹³⁰ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 248. Katznelson's book focuses on the administration's decision to run programs in southern states without disrupting the Jim Crow system

¹³¹ The New York Times. "COUGHLIN SAYS WORD WAS 'COMMUNISTIC.'" (9 October, 1936).

¹³² Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 261

¹³³ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 164

¹³⁴ *Ibid* 164

Broderick, in contrast, states many times in his biography that Ryan supported efforts to increase consumer purchasing power, and claims that Ryan “never regretted” his decision to support Roosevelt.¹³⁵ In his autobiography, Ryan seems to corroborate Broderick’s argument. Rather than offering any serious criticism, Ryan claims that “practically all the reform measures enacted during the Roosevelt administration have met with my hearty approval.”¹³⁶ Though he does express some doubt about the extent to which government “pump priming” can permanently fix the economy, he saw it as a necessary part of the economic recovery.¹³⁷ Furthermore, he lists “expenditure of public money for public works both to provide employment and to increase the purchasing power of the masses” among his list of “highly desirable means and ends.”¹³⁸ One can detect some of the pragmatism that Broderick had earlier highlighted in Ryan’s argument that “a comprehensive reading of American history will disclose that the reform measures enacted since the spring of 1933 constitute a greater advance toward a regime of social justice than the whole body of reform legislation previously passed since the adoption of the Constitution.”¹³⁹ It seems that if Ryan had any private doubts about the specific mechanisms of the New Deal, he never lost faith in the project as a whole.

Then there is the simple fact that, as an activist, Ryan whole career had required pragmatism, while Coughlin had more to gain by painting himself as a

¹³⁵ Francis Broderick. *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan*. (New York: Macmillan, 1963). 209, 212, 217

¹³⁶ John A. Ryan. *Social Doctrine in Action*. (New York: Harper, 1941). 248

¹³⁷ *Ibid* 239

¹³⁸ *Ibid* 248

¹³⁹ *Ibid* 248

contrarian and outsider. Ryan had spent his career working with non-Catholic people and groups in order to win incremental reforms. Furthermore, he had seen many of these reforms defeated by legal opposition, and had spent most of his career as an outsider. His many defeats, coupled with his time spent in Washington, convinced him that “the only logical and effective method” for combatting the problems of poverty was “by a national statute.”¹⁴⁰ Without an existing Catholic political party, the only feasible way to implement a system based on Catholic principles was to exert influence within the Democratic Party. Broderick also points out, on a more personal level, that Ryan was already in his mid-sixties when Roosevelt became president, so it was essentially “now or never” for achieving his life’s goals.¹⁴¹ According to Broderick, this sense of urgency led Ryan to abandon “pettifogging quibbles on detail” and embrace the only viable option he saw for social change.¹⁴² It must be noted that Broderick, in his introduction, makes clear that he is a sympathetic biographer and part of Ryan’s “progressive tradition,” so his assessment may be overly generous.¹⁴³ Roosevelt and some of his advisers had publicly praised Ryan for years, and had at times appealed to him for advice.¹⁴⁴ This and his increasing, though still always advisory, role in the government can be viewed as a form of flattery, and Ryan’s desire for increased personal influence may have played some role in his loyalty to the administration.

¹⁴⁰ Murphy. “An ‘Indestructible Right’: John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938.” 82

¹⁴¹ Francis Broderick. *Right Reverend New Dealer, John A. Ryan*. (New York: Macmillan, 1963). 217

¹⁴² *Ibid* 217

¹⁴³ *Ibid* vii

¹⁴⁴ Murphy. “An ‘Indestructible Right’: John Ryan and the Catholic Origins of the U.S. Living Wage Movement, 1906–1938.” 83-84

When trying to answer this question, it is impossible to overlook these kinds of personal interactions between both men and the administration. While Ryan was able to parlay his public profile into increasing influence within the government, Roosevelt and his advisers took clear steps to keep Coughlin at arm's length. Despite Coughlin's repeated attempts to insert himself into the debate over the Patman Bonus Bill, which would have addressed the demands of the Bonus Army protesters, the administration ignored him and eventually passed a different version of the bill without Coughlin's input.¹⁴⁵ Later, when Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau published a list of major silver speculators, it came to light that Coughlin's personal secretary held "contracts for 500,000 ounces of silver, purchased for \$20,000 on behalf of the Radio League of the Little Flower."¹⁴⁶ In the eyes of many, this cast Coughlin's preaching of free silver as a mere self-interested scheme and significantly undermined his credibility. Subtle gestures like these convinced Coughlin that he would never become influential in the Roosevelt administration, and fueled his personal dislike for both Roosevelt and his policies.

¹⁴⁵ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 139

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid* 125

CHAPTER THREE: Legacies

I.

Two strains of American Catholic social teaching emerged in the 1930s, which can be labeled as “reformist” and “conservative.” These two groups often came into conflict with each other over issues such as support for the New Deal and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. As with any intellectual movements, the boundaries of the two wings were not well defined and there were some individuals who combined elements of both, but certain features distinguish the two branches. The reformist wing, of which John A. Ryan was one of the originators and principal exponents in America, opposed unregulated capitalism to varying degrees and sought Catholic solutions to working class hardship. They fervently supported labor unions and largely embraced the vision of a new social order put forth in *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, and related encyclicals. Through his personal mentorship and his writing, Ryan influenced many key players in the post-World War II Catholic labor movement, so much so that the period from the 1930s to the 1960s has been called the “John A. Ryan Era” of that movement.¹ Among the diverse set of people who came under Ryan’s influence after World War II were labor priests, union organizers, and the founders of the Catholic Worker movement. Stephen Koeth claims that the reformist Catholicism of John Ryan was strongest from WWII through the 1960s, when it began to fall out of favor.²

¹ Koeth. “The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan.” 130

² *Ibid* 99-100

Father Charles Coughlin makes a useful stand-in for the conservative wing of Catholic social teaching at that time, though many others did not share his idiosyncrasies or develop their ideas to the same extent. I use the term “Coughlinites” to represent conservative Catholics from the mid-1930s through the immediate postwar years. After Coughlin’s departure from radio in 1942, his influence obviously waned. Even at his peak, many of his followers took up the cause of anti-communism without fully embracing the economic system of the encyclicals. Anti-communism defined this branch, and animated most of its followers. Though Ryanite Catholics always made sure to criticize communism, and often worked to subvert their influence in labor unions, Coughlinites took their opposition to a much higher level. As often happened with other anti-communist groups, their hatred of communism often made them hostile to any form of collectivism, which could extend to labor unions and New Deal programs. Though Coughlin sometimes voiced support for labor unions, his sermons generally show increased emphasis on stability and so he opposed any sort of strike or direct action. Thus, many of his followers, especially those who remained after his 1936 election debacle, were even more reactionary than he was. The increasing conservatism of Coughlin and his followers brought them into conflict with reformist Catholics, with whom Coughlin had originally claimed common cause.³

Ryan’s ideas had an especially far reach due to his prolific writing and his prominent positions in later years. Thus, while he mentored several important activists

³ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 151

from the clergy and supported others through his position on the National Catholic Welfare Council, many discovered his ideas through reading his books and pamphlets. The three main groups who tried to implement the ideas from Ryan and the encyclicals were Catholic union organizers, labor priests, and the Catholic Worker movement. All of these groups worked together in various ways. The latter two, especially, supported Catholic union leaders such as Philip Murray of the CIO. All three groups shared the conviction of the authors of the encyclicals, that they had to seek out a Catholic alternative to laissez-faire capitalism in order to avoid the danger of communism.

Labor priests brought ideas from Ryan and the encyclicals to the parish level, often setting up "labor schools" to educate local workers.⁴ As Charles Morris argues, "A priest's moral status made him a natural mediator," so both workers and employers would often consent to mediation by local labor priests.⁵ Labor priests were generally most effective in industrial cities like New York, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, which had high concentrations of Catholics and union members. A contingent of labor priests also worked in the NCWC's Social Action Division (SAD) in Washington, under the direct supervision of Ryan and his handpicked successor, Fr. Raymond McGowan.⁶ The Division spent most of its money and effort producing pamphlets, organizing conferences, and holding labor seminars for priests and union leaders.⁷ As its director

⁴ Cort. "ACTU and the Auto Workers." 338

⁵ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 219

⁶ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 102-103

⁷ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 221; See John A. Ryan. *American Democracy vs. Racism, Communism*. (New York: The Paulist Press, 1941) for a good example of one of their pamphlets.

from 1920-1945, John Ryan shaped the group's agenda and selected its personnel.⁸ Both Monsignor George Higgins and Father Cronin had been studying at the Catholic University of America when Ryan handpicked them to serve join the SAD.⁹ After Ryan's death in 1945, Higgins and Cronin rose to further prominence within the SAD and used "as a national platform from which they could influence federal legislation and liberal reform."¹⁰ As Koeth points out, "Higgins and Cronin could not simply repeat their mentor's formula for social reform, but adapted the principles Ryan had gleaned from the social encyclicals and applied them to the concerns of their age."¹¹ Promoting unionism remained the top priority, and both men publicly attacked the wave of right-to-work laws that followed the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947.¹² Whereas Ryan had offered some support for the African-American civil rights movement, Higgins and especially Cronin played a "crucial role in organizing religious leaders in support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act."¹³

Outside of Washington, other labor priests translated the theories of Ryanite intellectuals into local activism. One of the most successful examples of this was the Catholic Radical Alliance, founded in Pittsburgh in 1936 by Monsignor Charles Owen Rice and Father Carl Hensler.¹⁴ Originally a chapter of the Catholic Worker movement, founded by Dorothy Day, whom Rice idolized, the Alliance quickly grew into an

⁸ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 102

⁹ *Ibid* 105

¹⁰ *Ibid* 101

¹¹ *Ibid* 100

¹² *Ibid* 113-114

¹³ *Ibid* 100

¹⁴ Neil Betten. "Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940." (*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 4, 1970). 526. Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 182

independent entity.¹⁵ Rice maintained a strong working relationship with Philip Murray and the CIO, who he saw as “a bulwark against Communism.”¹⁶ Hensler was “the brilliant pupil of Msgr. John A. Ryan.”¹⁷ Together they sought to promote “NRA-type vocational and industrial groups as suggested in the encyclicals,” and to combat Father Coughlin, who they said “had misused the term social justice.”¹⁸ The alliance’s main activities were whipping up Catholic support for the Steel Workers’ Organizing Commission and the CIO and countering the efforts of local communist group.¹⁹ When other Catholic Workers founded the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) in 1937, Hensler and Rice quickly linked the Alliance to the new organization.²⁰ Thanks to the lower concentrations of both communists and Coughlinites in Pittsburgh, and the “bare-knuckled politics” of local union organizers and labor priests, the Pittsburgh ACTU became stronger than the original New York chapter.²¹ Hensler and Rice were merely some of the most successful of many labor priests nationwide. The Pittsburgh model, with labor priests helping facilitate union activity among local Catholics, both in the ACTU and in non-Catholic industrial unions, proved successful in many other industrial cities.

¹⁵ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 213; Neil Betten. “Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940.” (*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 4, 1970). 535-526

¹⁶ ; Neil Betten. “Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940.” (*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 4, 1970). 524; Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 152

¹⁷ *The Pittsburgh Press*. October 22, 1937. 42

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 150-151; Neil Betten. “Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940.” (*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 4, 1970). 530

²¹ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 151

Rice and other more radical labor priests owed some intellectual debt to the Catholic Worker movement, founded in 1933 by two Catholic lay people in New York City.²² Dorothy Day, who converted to Catholicism in her thirties, founded the original *Catholic Worker* newspaper with Peter Maurin, a roving French intellectual who had settled in New York. The movement founded “hospitality houses” that offered food and shelter to the poor while educating local workers on Catholic social teaching.²³ While Maurin sought to create a system of agrarian socialist communes, and did start a few short-lived collective farms, Day pursued more pragmatic goals like unionization and the hospitality houses.²⁴ In 1936, another Catholic convert named John Cort joined the movement after graduating from Harvard.²⁵ More of a Christian socialist than a Ryanite, Cort became a leading figure in the movement and later played a significant part in the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.²⁶

The ACTU was founded in New York City in 1937 by members of the Catholic Worker movement, and some Catholic union members.²⁷ Like Catholic Worker, the ACTU was founded by laymen, but it received support from local clergy.²⁸ John Cort, a prominent Catholic Worker, wrote the group’s constitution based on the social encyclicals and the “Bishop’s Program of Social Reconstruction,” which had been

²² Betten. “Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940.” 525

²³ *Ibid* 526

²⁴ *Ibid* 526

²⁵ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 211

²⁶ Cort. “ACTU and the Auto Workers.” 347-348, 351

²⁷ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 211-212; John Cort. “ACTU and the Auto Workers.” (US Catholic Historian 9, no. 4: 1990). 335; Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 151

²⁸ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 248; Betten. “Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940.” 519

written almost entirely by John Ryan.²⁹ The Actists, as they were called, wanted to “stimulate Catholic union activity” to create an alternative to Communist irreligion and AFL corruption.³⁰ Local chapters set up labor schools in much the same manner as the labor priests and Catholic Workers, and tried to spread Catholic labor ideas among union members.³¹ The ACTU was mostly Ryanite in character, and shared Ryan’s pragmatic support for existing unions and the New Deal. Like Catholic Worker and the labor priests, the leaders of the ACTU tried to implement ideas from the encyclicals, most notably in their proposal for “industry councils” modeled after the ones in *Quadragesimo Anno*.³² Coughlinites often accused members of the ACTU of being communists, and worked against ACTU’s efforts.³³ Due to New York being a stronghold of support for Coughlin, the ACTU enjoyed much more success in Midwestern cities like Pittsburgh and Detroit, where Ryanite labor priests were more active and Ryan’s ideas were more prevalent.³⁴

Members of the ACTU almost always joined other industrial unions, such as the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers, and operated as a voting bloc within those larger organizations. Despite Coughlin’s presence nearby, the Detroit ACTU local grew into the most powerful chapter in the country by the early 1940s.³⁵ This was due partly to Coughlin’s decline in popularity by that point, and the public support of

²⁹ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 212

³⁰ *Ibid* 211

³¹ *Ibid* 212

³² Cort. “ACTU and the Auto Workers.” 344; Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 214

³³ Cort. “ACTU and the Auto Workers.” 344

³⁴ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 151

³⁵ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 214

Archbishop Edward Mooney, who was both pro-labor and anti-Coughlin.³⁶ Mooney served as "the chairman of the NCWC's administrative board," and "organized the first Detroit meeting of Ryan's prolabor 'Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems.'"³⁷ The Detroit ACTU shared many members with the UAW, and the Actist members of that union backed Walter Reuther once he became an anti-communist.³⁸ Reuther also supported the Catholic industry council plan.³⁹ When Coughlin tried to use his radio program to break a 1939 UAW strike at Chrysler, Actists helped keep the Catholic faction in line and were "a major factor in the subsequent strike victory."⁴⁰ The Actists remained an important constituency within the UAW and the CIO throughout World War II and especially afterwards, when the CIO became the most important battlefield for Catholic unionism.

The struggle for power within the CIO became a flashpoint in the conflict between (mostly Ryanite) Catholic union members and their clerical supporters, and Communists. Being a large organization, the CIO had several different factions vying for control. By the late 1940s, a bitter conflict developed between Catholics, with some non-Catholic anti-communists, and communists. The ACTU held significant influence within the Catholic faction, and its leaders tried to use their voting power to elevate Catholic and Catholic-aligned members to positions of leadership.⁴¹ The most

³⁶ Cort. "ACTU and the Auto Workers." 338

³⁷ Koeth. "'The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan.'"; Nelson Lichtenstein. *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*. (University of Illinois Press, 1995); Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 221

³⁸ Nelson Lichtenstein. *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*. (University of Illinois Press, 1995) 188; Cort. "ACTU and the Auto Workers." 337, 344-345

³⁹ Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 214

⁴⁰ Cort. "ACTU and the Auto Workers." 342

⁴¹ Cort. "ACTU and the Auto Workers." 339

important of these leaders was Philip Murray, a devout Catholic who served as president of the SWOC and later of the CIO.⁴² Murray had long sought to implement the ideas of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* in the context of American labor unions, and in World War II began lobbying the Roosevelt administration in support of the industry council plan.⁴³ As a Catholic, Murray had always disliked the communists within the SWOC and CIO and he sought to undermine their power when possible.⁴⁴ The CIO's communist faction was strong and well organized. This, coupled with the somewhat decentralized nature of the CIO made the communists hard to dislodge.

By 1944, communist influence within the CIO had become a national issue, one of the most important in that year's presidential election.⁴⁵ Anti-New Deal conservatives, as well as some Coughlinite Catholics, accused the CIO of being wholly communist in order to delegitimize its efforts and the entire New Deal project.⁴⁶ As Heineman notes, "This placed Murray in the awkward position of having to dispute the extent of Communist power in the CIO so as not to permit conservatives to smear the labor movement."⁴⁷ The attacks mounted, and the union came under investigation by HUAC.⁴⁸ The Ryanite labor priests and intellectuals leapt into action, worried that

⁴² Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 147

⁴³ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 163;

⁴⁴ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 147

⁴⁵ Rosswurm. "Communism and the CIO: Catholics and the 1944 Presidential Campaign." 78-79

⁴⁶ *Time*. "The Press: Coughlin Quits." (18 May, 1942).

⁴⁷ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 148

⁴⁸ Rosswurm. "Communism and the CIO: Catholics and the 1944 Presidential Campaign." 76

their years of lobbying and activism would be undone. The Detroit ACTU, through its popular publication, vouched for the CIO and called on Catholics to support it.⁴⁹ John Cort, a Catholic Worker and one of the original Actists, published an essay in *Commonweal* with a similar message.⁵⁰ Largely through the work of George Higgins, the Social Action Division of the NCWC joined the chorus of support in December 1944.⁵¹ Fortunately for the CIO, the presence and support of Catholic members and priests often helped inoculate them against accusations of communism.⁵² Catholic intellectuals were some of the first to call for a total purge of Communists from the CIO, which Murray eventually initiated in 1948.⁵³ This dramatic event surely marked the highpoint of Catholic unionism in America.

II.

While Ryan's personal profile rose through the late 1930s until his death in 1945, Coughlin descended into extremism and gradually became a pariah. Following his humiliation in the 1936 election, he abruptly announced his retirement from public life, but then returned to radio only a few months later.⁵⁴ His subsequent broadcasts showed an increasingly paranoid mindset, and the anti-Semitism which had previously lurked in the background became explicit. He transitioned from attacking international

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 77

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 80

Ibid 83

⁵² Betten. "Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940." 519

⁵³ Rosswurm. "Communism and the CIO: Catholics and the 1944 Presidential Campaign." 82; Charles Morris. *American Catholic*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011). 218

⁵⁴ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 261

bankers and communists to identifying all Jews with both of those groups. Already somewhat incoherent, he claimed in one 1939 sermon that Jews had created banking as a "Frankenstein," and then revolted against it in the Russian Revolution.⁵⁵ In a weak attempt to cover himself, he concluded the same sermon by saying that "America has no room for anti-Semitism."⁵⁶ In another broadcast, he claimed that the Nazis primarily fought communists, and that the attacks on German Jews were receiving disproportionate attention because of Jewish control of the media.⁵⁷ By 1940, a group of men claiming Coughlin as their intellectual godfather had been arrested for stealing rifles from a federal armory. They called themselves the "Christian Front," and were inspired by Coughlin's call for a Christian Front in politics.⁵⁸ Naturally, Coughlin disavowed the group, but in the eyes of the media, Coughlin became an agent of fascism in America. From this point on, Coughlin's rhetoric took on a more sinister association in the minds of many Americans. It certainly did not help that while this was taking place, he was loudly and frequently calling for the US to stay out of World War II.⁵⁹ After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Coughlin's agitation became anathema to the public and threatening to the administration, and he found it increasingly difficult to continue his broadcasts.

⁵⁵ Charles E. Coughlin. *Internationalism*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1939). 6

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 9

⁵⁷ Charles E. Coughlin. *"Persecution, Jewish and Christian."* (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1938). 3, 4

⁵⁸ Charles E. Coughlin. *I Take My Stand*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1940). 5

⁵⁹ Charles E. Coughlin. *Internationalism*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1939). 1-2

Coughlin had long been controversial among members of the Church hierarchy, but had always enjoyed the protection of his superior, Archbishop Michael Gallagher.⁶⁰ The tide began to turn for Coughlin when, during his attempt to spoil the 1936 election for Roosevelt, the papal envoy Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) visited America and sparked rumors of an impending papal crackdown.⁶¹ Nothing public came of this visit, but in 1937, Archbishop Gallagher died and was replaced by Edward Mooney, who held no sympathy for Coughlin. Soon after Mooney's arrival, Coughlin attacked Roosevelt in a broadcast and said that "Catholicism and the CIO are incompatible."⁶² Mooney quickly issued a public rebuke of Coughlin, signaling the old regime of tolerance was now gone.⁶³ In 1942, new radio regulations forced Coughlin off the air for good, leaving him with only his magazine, *Social Justice*. Later that same year, the Postmaster General revoked Coughlin's mailing privileges and, on May 1st, Archbishop Mooney ordered him to stop all "political activities."⁶⁴ This marked the end of Coughlin's public career, though he would continue to serve as the parish priest of Royal Oak until his death in 1979.

Within a decade of Coughlin's silencing, a new spokesman for aggressive Catholic anticommunism emerged. Though Joseph McCarthy did show some superficial similarities to Coughlin, it is difficult to draw a direct line between the two men. McCarthy grew up in Wisconsin and was working his way through law school for

⁶⁰ Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). 128

⁶¹ New York Times. "Mgr. Ryan Backs Roosevelt, Attacks Father Coughlin." (9 October, 1936)

⁶² *Time*. "The Press: Coughlin Quits." (18 May, 1942).

⁶³ *Time*. "The Press: Coughlin Quits." (18 May, 1942).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

most of Coughlin's period of notoriety. Coughlin did broadcast from some stations in Wisconsin, so it is possible that McCarthy had heard some of his sermons.⁶⁵ It is also possible that McCarthy became an anti-communist without any influence from Coughlin, since that sentiment was quite prevalent among Midwestern Catholics at that time. In any case, McCarthy rose to prominence years after Coughlin's departure, and some scholars view him as a successor to Coughlin in the role of spokesperson for the Catholic right.⁶⁶ Coughlin, by this time, had retreated from public view, so it is impossible to know exactly what he thought of McCarthy. It would be fair to guess, however, that he approved of a highly visible Catholic attacking communism in the halls of Congress.

Ryanite intellectuals almost universally opposed McCarthyist tactics because, like Coughlin before him, they threatened the legitimate pursuit of social justice. Ryan and others pointed out that the loyalty oaths instituted in the early 1950s were pointless, since atheistic communists would have no problem lying or breaking oaths.⁶⁷ Msgr. George Higgins issued a public rebuttal to McCarthy and to critics who charged that "Catholics as a group [were] behind the McCarthy investigation."⁶⁸ Despite the objections to McCarthyism, his aggressive anti-communism made some inroads into the reformist Catholic community. Many Ryanites took issue with McCarthy's methods, but not with his persecution of communists. William Cronin, a

⁶⁵ Sheila Terman Cohen. *Jews in Wisconsin*. (Wisconsin Historical Society, 2016.)

⁶⁶ Michael W. Miles. *The Odyssey of the American Right*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). 242

⁶⁷ Kenneth J. Heineman. *A Catholic New Deal*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999). 149

⁶⁸ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 122-123

personal disciple of Ryan and a champion of many reformist causes, collaborated with the FBI to target communists and served as a speechwriter for the aggressively anti-communist Richard Nixon.⁶⁹ As Koeth points out, "Cronin made contact with McCarthy in the early stages of the Tydings Committee hearings, but when he ignored the SAD's offer of assistance Cronin dismissed McCarthy's approach."⁷⁰ Even in Higgins' reproach of McCarthy, he argued that "the investigation [had] degenerated into a fiasco," not that it was illegitimate.⁷¹ Hensler and Rice, too, testified before HUAC regarding communists in the labor movement.⁷² The normalization of more militant Cold War anticommunism helped fray the edges of the Ryanite movement, much as it did to other reform movements at that time.

Though McCarthy rose and fell fairly quickly, a more enduring figure emerged as the "successor to Joe McCarthy as the leader of the Catholic right."⁷³ William F. Buckley, Jr. was an intellectual rather than a politician, and occasionally engaged Ryanites in direct debate.⁷⁴ The issue of anticommunism brought "the defection of a sizable minority of ethnic Catholics from the Democratic Party...in the 1950s."⁷⁵ The John Birch Society, arguably the most prominent inheritors of Coughlin's conspiratorial style of anticommunism, "had a Catholic membership of 25 per cent."⁷⁶ Both Buckley and the John Birch Society echoed the earlier criticisms on New Deal "collectivism,"

⁶⁹ *Ibid* 100

⁷⁰ *Ibid* 122

⁷¹ *Ibid* 122-123

⁷² Betten. "Charles Owen Rice: Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940." 527-528

⁷³ Michael W. Miles. *The Odyssey of the American Right*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). 243

⁷⁴ *Ibid* 253

⁷⁵ *Ibid* 242

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 249

and so represented a threat to the accumulated progress of the Ryanites.⁷⁷ After both Buckley and the national Church hierarchy disavowed the John Birch Society, its support among Catholics did dissipate to some extent.⁷⁸ Buckley, however, only grew stronger through the 1950s. He ridiculed the Ryanites' softness towards communism as "old-fashioned and increasingly useless, while his new brand of conservatism incorporated many non-Catholic ideas and transcended the Catholic audience.⁷⁹ The rise of Buckley and his magazine, *National Review*, roughly coincides with the waning of the Ryanite branch of Catholic social thought.⁸⁰

By the 1960s, Ryanite Catholicism looked increasingly out of place. Its emphasis on the traditional family brought it into conflict with the emerging feminist and pro-choice movements, while its demands for NRA-style industry councils made it seem like a relic of the 1930s.⁸¹ Many Catholic priests helped implement the programs of the Great Society and the War on Poverty, but they generally favored newer Catholic intellectuals.⁸² The most prominent Catholic activists were Daniel and Philip Berrigan, two priests who led radical protests against the Vietnam War. The Berrigan brothers derived their philosophy primarily from the Catholic Worker and Jesuit traditions, and were much less conservative on social and sexual issues than Ryan and his acolytes had been.⁸³ Their most notable exploits were their arrests for

⁷⁷ *Ibid* 200

⁷⁸ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 123-124

⁷⁹ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 124. See George Nash. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1976).

⁸⁰ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 130

⁸¹ *Ibid* 99-100

⁸² *Ibid* 130

⁸³ Hitchcock. "The Evolution of the American Catholic Left." 69, 70, 78

destroying draft records, in which they variously poured blood or napalm onto the documents.⁸⁴ The brothers often corresponded with Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who also became influential in the 1960s.⁸⁵ Mirroring the trend in non-Catholic society, this new wave of intellectuals represented a Catholic New Left that was much more radical than earlier groups.

At the same time "a new concept of social justice...emerged from Vatican II," which largely supplanted the Thomistic ideas of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*.⁸⁶ The earlier encyclicals had altered the Church's positions on certain issues, but they had maintained its resistance to modernity. The reforms of Vatican II represented the Church's embrace of the modern world. John Courtney Murray, a controversial American Jesuit, "exerted great influence" at the Second Vatican Council and was the primary author of the encyclical *Dignitatis Humanae*.⁸⁷ Through that encyclical and several others, the focus of the Vatican shifted even more towards poverty, but with an expanded, international scope. Subsequent encyclicals reflected new Cold War realities, giving new attention to the Third World and the nuclear arms race.⁸⁸ By the 1970s, liberation theology had appeared and spread quickly from Latin America to other parts of the Catholic world. That movement was influenced by Marxism and by the Jesuit tradition which had informed a great deal of Catholic social

⁸⁴ *Ibid* 73, 74

⁸⁵ *Ibid* 70

⁸⁶ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 132

⁸⁷ Charles E. Curran. *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891-Present*. (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002). 11

⁸⁸ *Ibid* 11

teaching.⁸⁹ The combination of these trends supplanted the earlier schools of thought and brought the "John A. Ryan era" to an end.⁹⁰

The conflict between Ryanites and Coughlin and his successors took place during a time when Catholics were still a fairly distinct group within American society. The waning of Ryan's branch of Catholic social teaching coincided with the increasing assimilation of Catholics into the American mainstream. The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 and the increasing entry of Catholics into the professional class indicate the breaking down of barriers between Catholics and non-Catholics.⁹¹ Though some differences still exist, the lines are not as clear they were in the 1930s.

⁸⁹ *Ibid* 12-13

⁹⁰ Koeth. "The Mental Grandchildren of Monsignor John A. Ryan." 130

⁹¹ Robert Wuthnow. *The Restructuring of American Religion*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). 73, 86, 93

CONCLUSION

Following Vatican II, the debates within the Catholic intellectual community largely shifted away from the earlier focus on Thomism. Today, however, with the election of Pope Francis, some of the earlier ideas from the debates of the 1930s have resurfaced. Francis, a Jesuit, places poverty at the center of his focus, and frequently cites capitalism as its source. As McGreevy notes, *Rerum Novarum* was primarily written and edited by Jesuits, and reflects their emphasis on the poor.¹ Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, clearly states that the document should be "added to the body of the Church's social teaching," indicating Francis' membership in that tradition.² In that encyclical, Francis criticizes "transnational corporations" and blames the pursuit of "economic interests" over the "common good" for the weak response to global climate change.³ Just as Ryan had to battle the reactionaries within the Church, Francis faces resistance from Traditionalists who reject Vatican II.

Echoes of the 1930s have appeared in other areas. The 2016 Trump presidential campaign, with its economic nationalism and "America First" rhetoric, sounded much more reminiscent of the 1930s than of Buckleyite conservatism. The "conservatism" of Steve Bannon, Trump's close adviser and a Catholic from a working-class household, bears a much stronger resemblance to Coughlin than to Buckley. Though Bannon incorporates ideas from a wide variety of disparate sources, his

¹ John T. McGreevy. *Catholicism and American Freedom*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). 127

² Pope Francis. *Laudato Si*. (Rome: The Vatican, 2015). 15

³ *Ibid* 38, 54

economic nationalism and disdain for the global financial elite would not sound out of place in one of Coughlin's sermons. In addition, Bannon does not share Buckleyite conservatives' allegiance to laissez-faire capitalism. In a speech to the Vatican, he claimed that that system "looks to make people commodities" and likened it to "the precepts of Marx" in that respect.⁴ That rhetorical technique, portraying unfettered capitalism and communism as moral equivalents and advocating a middle way, was a favorite of Coughlin and Ryan, and of the authors of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*.

The populist and conspiratorial rhetoric of the Trump campaign would also seem right at home in the writings of Coughlin. Compare Bannon's pledge at a convention that the Trump administration would do battle with "corporatist, globalist elites" to Coughlin's tirades against "internationalism" and the "high priests of international finance."⁵ This worldview has a long history in America. We can trace its antecedents from the anti-British conspiracies in colonial times to some of the Populists, to Coughlin and then the John Birch Society. Pat Buchanan espoused it in the 1990s and, more interestingly, based some of his ideas on *Rerum Novarum*.⁶ The continued embrace of the ideas of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* by such

⁴ Reporter, J. Lester Feder BuzzFeed News. "This Is How Steve Bannon Sees The Entire World." *BuzzFeed*. Accessed March 26, 2017. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world>.

⁵ Charles E. Coughlin. *Internationalism*. (Royal Oak, MI: The Author, 1939); Charles E. Coughlin. *Driving out the Money Changers*. (Royal Oak, MI: Radio League of the Little Flower, 1933); David Lawler. "Steve Bannon Vows Donald Trump Will Take on 'Globalist' Elites with Nationalist Agenda at CPAC Conservative Conference." (The Telegraph, 23 Feb. 2017).

⁶ Ostler. "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism."; Samuel G. Freedman. "The Father Coughlin of 1996." *New York Times*. February 25, 1996

influential and disparate figures as Pat Buchanan, Steve Bannon, and Pope Francis shows their continued relevance in the modern world. Though the debates of the 1930s, including the ones between Coughlin and Ryan, seem distant, they can still provide insight into more recent debates over economy and society.

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