

## CHAPTER 2

# Soldiers for the Body of Christ

AFTER THE ELECTION OF 1936, FATHER COUGHLIN FADED FROM minds of the political class. Franklin Roosevelt, the priest's chief enemy, had won reelection in a landslide, ceding just eight electoral votes and carrying the popular vote by a huge margin. But the British, at least, were not so sure that Coughlin was in retreat. In April 1938 the British Library of Information, a New York arm of the Foreign Office, assembled a detailed report on Coughlin's activities. "Recently . . . he has regained some influence," the report noted. Coughlin still had millions of radio listeners and, after just two years on newsstands, the circulation of *Social Justice* had grown to 350,000. After Coughlin encouraged his followers to protest President Roosevelt's 1937 Judicial Reorganization Act—the so-called court-packing bill—Congress received 233,000 telegrams, and the bill was voted down. "While Father Coughlin cannot be given by any means all of the responsibility for this defeat, his influence was clearly considerable," the report read. Isaiah Berlin, then a twenty-nine-year-old clerk for the British Information Services, scribbled his own views on the report's cover letter, before the findings made their way to the British embassy in Washington. "He is indeed a dangerous and irresponsible element in the American scene," the future philosopher wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Another outsider to the United States, also one of the esteemed thinkers of the twentieth century, felt similarly. Expelled from Germany by the Nazis in 1933, the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich had, as he put it, "the honor to be the first non-Jewish professor dismissed from a German university." He

then accepted a position at Union Theological Seminary in New York. From his refuge in Manhattan, Tillich watched as right-wing politics gained traction in New York and the wider American scene. What alarmed him was not just that Christians, especially Catholics, were embracing militancy but also that their targets included Jews. Even worse, the impetus for anti-Semitism was theological, and the oracles of Jew hatred were Catholic priests.<sup>2</sup>

Tillich explained his apprehensions in “Catholicism and Anti-Judaism,” a wide-ranging essay written around 1940. A keen observer of Christian-Jewish relations, Tillich was hardly naïve about Catholic anti-Judaism, but he saw something else in the politics of American Catholic militancy: anti-Semitism. Anti-Judaism encompassed discrimination against Jews on religious grounds, but anti-Judaism easily slipped into anti-Semitism—discrimination against Jews on the basis of race. “The soil of all anti-Semitism is anti-Judaism,” Tillich wrote. Observing “no *basic* difference between Europe and America,” Tillich realized that American Catholics might welcome Fascism and its attendant anti-Semitism.

That potential was being unleashed by the Church hierarchy itself. Tillich decried “the Fascist type of clerical anti-Semitism,” which was “the type of Father Coughlin and the ‘Christian Front.’” The leadership of priests was distressing for at least two reasons. First, history showed that priests represented the “officer class” of the Church, capable of spurring laypeople to odious action. By way of example, Tillich argued that the Dreyfus affair, in which a French Jewish military officer was wrongly convicted of treason, would have made no headway without the direction of Jesuits.

Second, and perhaps more important, priestly anti-Semitism gave Catholics sanction to adopt Nazi ideas in spite of Pope Pius XI’s expressed view that Hitler was promoting a pagan heresy. “Hitler as an anti-Semitic pagan Fascist could not be accepted” by the Catholic faithful, Tillich argued. But “Hitler as an anti-Judaistic Catholic Fascist could be accepted.” At risk, then, were not just individual Jews but also the sort of society in which Jews could be secure. This “reactionary type of clerical anti-Semitism,” Tillich feared, would end up “destroying the liberal-democratic world to which the Jews as equals belong.”<sup>3</sup> American democracy itself was imperiled by the movement from anti-Judaism to anti-Semitism, a movement of laypeople led by clerics.

Tillich’s concerns were well placed. The “dangerous and irresponsible element” that Isaiah Berlin feared was plainly coalescing in New York, in the form of an anti-Semitic anti-Communism elevated in the name of Chris-

tianity. Thus the combination of religiously imbued anti-Semitism and anti-Communism that marked the Christian Front was obvious as well in an event held at the Commodore Hotel in Manhattan on October 30, 1938. Dubbed a Pro-American Rally, the occasion featured Elizabeth Dilling, best-selling author of 1934's *The Red Network: A 'Who's Who' and Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots*. Dilling railed against the supposedly radical leftist activities of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and mocked First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and her fellow "comrats." Dilling was well known as a religious speaker and throughout the 1930s made the rounds of Bible conventions and Christian-sponsored lectures. Under the banner of Americanness, the rally seamlessly integrated Dilling's Christian anti-Communism with Fascist anti-Semitism, exemplified by the screening of a short film showing "the swastika . . . and a picture of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini [who] were applauded (and hissed)," according to a *New York Times* report. Fritz Kuhn, leader of the German American Bund, a US Nazi organization, looked on from the audience along "with two uniformed members of the bund."<sup>4</sup>

The Pro-American Rally was organized by Allen Alderson Zoll, executive vice president of a murky organization known as the American Federation Against Communism. Zoll perfectly embodied the amalgamation of anti-Semitism and anti-Communism. By his own proud admission, his group's main goal was to infiltrate "agents" into meetings of the Communist Party of the United States of America and disrupt the organization. And the responsibility for Communism lay, of course, with Jews. A short while after the rally, Zoll found himself in Washington, testifying to a Senate subcommittee about the horrifying prospect that Harvard law professor Felix Frankfurter might soon have a seat on the Supreme Court. "The Jew has been fostering movements that are subversive to our government," Zoll told the senators.<sup>5</sup>

For Zoll, a believer in the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, anti-Communism necessitated Jew hatred. Father Edward Lodge Curran, a Roman Catholic priest who spoke at the Commodore Hotel rally, shared Zoll's views on Judeo-Bolshevism. Curran's International Catholic Truth Society used a word—truth—that Catholics recognize as a reference to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Yet Curran's was the gospel of anti-Communism. Curran fused theology and politics, creating a distortion that went unnoticed. Speaking to the crowd of 2,000 at the October 1938 rally, he warned that Communism, not Nazism, was the new "twentieth century paganism," a statement that gave Nazism theological sanction while configuring Communism as a heresy.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1930s Curran was one of the most educated priests in the United States. A member of the New York Bar, he held an MA from Columbia, a PhD from Fordham, and an LLM from Brooklyn Law School. He was a tremendous speaker and a presence on any podium. He would also go on to become the “shadow theologian” of the Christian Front. Always lurking in the background, he stood ready to lend expert theological and legal advice to the front’s public-facing leaders. Curran was extremely shrewd, as evidenced by one of the few occasions on which he spoke publicly. In July 1939 Curran became the only priest ever to substitute for Father Coughlin as the host of his weekly radio show, after Elliott Roosevelt, the president’s son, suggested censoring Coughlin for his anti-Semitism. Coughlin did not want to have a political shouting match with the president’s son, so Curran appeared with a retort to the White House as clever as it was twisted. “Let him call Moses an anti-Semite,” Curran countered, “since Moses pleaded with the tribes of Israel and Judah to follow him.” By 1942 Curran was known to US intelligence officials as “Father Coughlin’s Eastern echo.”<sup>7</sup> This was just the kind of man Tillich had warned about: a Catholic priest who would draw on fears of Communism to shepherd the faithful from anti-Judaism to anti-Semitism.

Zoll’s anti-Communist rally had an ecumenical bent, as evidenced by one of its scheduled speeches: an invocation delivered by the pastor of Manhattan’s Marble Collegiate Church, the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale.<sup>8</sup> A bespectacled forty-year-old who liked to drape himself in academic robes, Peale was accustomed to praying in public spaces with large multitudes. Two weeks earlier, with a giant American flag in the background, he presided over an Easter morning service at Central Park attended by a crowd of ten thousand and broadcast nationwide. How Peale, a Reformed Church in America pastor, got roped into what the *Daily Worker* called a “Rally of Fascists” is a mystery, but Peale was himself notably pro-capitalist and so may have been impressed by the anti-Communist roster of speakers.<sup>9</sup>

Peale was also given to bouts of militancy, and the idea of ecumenism appealed to him. “We must consecrate ourselves in militant religion,” he argued in a 1939 keynote speech at a Christian ecumenical conference in upstate New York. “The only cohesive force in the world is religion,” he noted, echoing the Lunns. Peale urged his listeners not to give up hope, even as war clouds gathered in Europe. “The game is not up by a good deal, for Christ is with us. . . . The center around which all warring nations can gather.”<sup>10</sup> This was just one example of Peale’s hallmark optimism. The author of *The Power of*

*Positive Thinking* would go on to become a celebrated American spiritual guru, the intellectual north star of a materialistic Christianity that celebrates the accretion of wealth as a marker of God's love.

Peale was never a far-right figure. His inclusion alongside Curran and Dilling may have been a play for mainstream appeal. After all, if Zoll had fringe ideas, he was also intent on spreading them into the center of society. His invitation to testify before the Senate demonstrates that he achieved some success in this regard. Today Peale is the only member of this motley crew whom the wider American public has heard of. The rest have been consigned to the dark corners of history's closet, occasionally trotted out as "cranks who salved their 'status anxiety' with conspiracy theories and bizarre panaceas."<sup>11</sup> But such dismissals belie the truth that, in the late 1930s, the likes of Curran and Dilling had substantial impact in society. Dilling exemplified the lay-person of faith who understood Communism as a threat to Christianity writ large. Other members of the faithful, Catholic and Protestant, could look to her for a charismatic articulation of their own views. And Curran and his ilk provided the clerical leadership that Catholics in particular needed to turn their sentiments into militant action. It was Curran and other priests who sacralized anti-Communism and anti-Semitism, casting the fight against the Judeo-Bolshevist menace as a theological necessity. That was just the kind of inspiration a Christian Front would need, if one should ever come to fruition.

Still, the question remained: How? How would the Christian Front materialize? What form would it take? Who would lead it, and who would serve? Would it be a source of militant action, or just militant rhetoric? There was already rhetoric to spare; the Pro-American Rally signaled as much. But none of its orators would ever plan an uprising, point a gun, or set a bomb. None of them ever claimed membership in any Christian Front, although Curran would be there behind the scenes. By early 1939 someone would emerge to harvest the crop planted at events like the Pro-American Rally. His name, even more distant from contemporary recognition than those of Dilling and Curran, was John F. Cassidy.

### **From Idea to Reality**

Cassidy was radicalized, appropriately enough, by Father Coughlin. Specifically, Cassidy was radicalized by the criticism directed at Coughlin for an extraordinary broadcast he delivered on November 20, 1938.

“Thousands of people must have been jolted out of their chairs,” Coughlin biographer Charles Tull wrote. In “Persecution—Jewish and Christian,” broadcast just a week and a half after Kristallnacht, “the Detroit priest actually proceeded to explain the Nazi persecution of the Jews as a defense mechanism against Communism.”<sup>12</sup> Nearly a hundred German Jews were murdered during Kristallnacht, more than 250 synagogues were desecrated and burned, and nearly 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses were vandalized. By the time Father Coughlin delivered his speech, Nazi authorities had rounded up more than 30,000 people and sent them to concentration camps for the “crime” of being Jewish.

But none of this moved Coughlin to sympathy. What did was the plight of Christians in Russia, Mexico, and Spain, which, according to Coughlin, “the Jewish gentleman who controlled the radio in the press” refused to report. Like Arnold Lunn, Coughlin found his grievance claim in the apparent widespread disinterest in Catholic suffering. But instead of using that grievance to foster a seemingly positive venture such as ecumenism, Coughlin castigated the silent. He engaged in what some today call “what-aboutism”: Jews were being oppressed, yes, but what about Catholics? A master manipulator of the media, he aimed to snatch away airtime from discussion of the Jewish persecution and steer attention to Catholic persecution under Communism. For Coughlin, Kristallnacht was an opportunity to talk about the real victims: Roman Catholics, who in the decades since the Russian Revolution had been placed under the thumb of “Jewish Communists,” with nary a word of protest from America’s Jews, politicians, or ecclesiastics.

Coughlin’s speech was an outrageous defense of Nazi atrocities. But to his followers, it was an impassioned plea for cosmic justice. “Witness the price that Christians have paid to uphold their religion against those who were anti-religionists,” Coughlin begged, “to uphold their Christ against those who were anti-Christ, to uphold their patriotism, their nationalism, against those who were unpatriotic and international.” As Bernard Duffy and Halford Ryan note, Coughlin’s speech was unusually effective in melding religious discourse and political critique. His “social and economic views were persuasively argued alongside and even within his religious and doctrinal message.”<sup>13</sup>

The speech has received a great deal of scholarly attention, but it may be the fifteen minutes afterward that most stimulated the audience. This portion of the broadcast—less noted in the voluminous Coughlin literature—was occupied by a prayer. After justifying the Nazi persecution of Jews, Coughlin

delivered a version of the most recognizable exhortation of the entire Christian canon, galvanizing to Catholics and Protestants alike: the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father who art in Heaven," he began, as lilting organ music played in the background. At first there was nothing conceivably controversial in these rhythms and cadences. But then, between lines, Coughlin interspersed political nuggets. "Instead of gifts to the afflicted in distant lands," Coughlin prayed, "our ships carry cargoes of debt." "Forgive us our sins," he continued, interjecting that "for too long we have been loud in our praise for those who preach the Gospel of Hate." Finally, Coughlin's growing tilt toward Catholic militancy came to the fore. "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done," he implored, "God give us power, give us courage, courage even unto death oh God, to marshal our forces, to battle for thy will."<sup>14</sup> The organ music drifted to a stop, followed by a reflective pause heard across crackling radios from coast to coast.

Coughlin's speech and prayer spoke to the existential struggle his followers already perceived between Communism and Catholicism, if not Christianity as a whole. But the general public, and many in his Coughlin's church, were aghast at his willingness to blame German Jews for the catastrophe visited on them. In light of his incendiary words, Coughlin's broadcaster in New York, WMCA, demanded that he clear his speeches with programmers before going on air. When he refused, the station dropped him. Coughlin's supporters saw WMCA's rebuke as a violation of his First Amendment rights, an overheated allegation given that the station, not the government, took him off the air. In any case, from the perspective of his fans, rejection by WMCA proved Coughlin's point: Catholics like him were persecuted by "non-Christians."<sup>15</sup>

The WMCA incident was a key step on the road to a living, breathing Christian Front. Coughlin's removal from the station's roster won him much clerical sympathy—James Keeling, a priest from St. Francis of Assisi parish in the Bronx, thought that the WMCA affair "was a dark cloud with a silver lining," since "people have become aroused to the fact that [their] liberty is endangered." A Paulist priest, Reverend James Carnell, defended Coughlin, saying that the "Communist government in Russia has murdered Christians and destroyed Catholic churches." But more important was the lay reaction. In New York the Irish-American Progressive League and the Christian-American Committee Against Communism (CACAC) held a joint meeting to urge other radio stations to keep Father Coughlin on the air. For CACAC, Father Coughlin was "the one voice that America needs to stop Communism."<sup>16</sup>

The only lay Catholic New Yorker to defend Coughlin in the press was the leader of CACAC: John Cassidy.

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Anti-Communism gave direction to Cassidy's life. Before there was CACAC, there was little more than the frustration of a rudderless young man. Thereafter, he would go on to become one of the Christian Front's national leaders and its first field general, promoting and planning terrorist activities in New York. Cassidy's iteration of the front was the genuine article. The Lunns had their committee, exploring the idea of a Christian Front as an ecumenical bulwark against Communism. The Vatican pressed that same agenda. Father Coughlin urged another agenda under the same name—anti-Communist, certainly, but also anti-Semitic and dispensing with ecumenism. It was Coughlin's variation on the Christian Front that Cassidy, joined by other far-right New York Catholics, made real.

Eventually Cassidy and his Christian Front would generate one of the largest files in the FBI's history. At first, though, Cassidy hoped to be the one writing such files, not their subject. On January 20, 1935, Cassidy applied for a position at the FBI's New York Field Office. This was the last-gasp job search of an overeducated, unemployed twenty-four-year-old amid the gloom of the Great Depression. Cassidy had finished two years of law school at Fordham University, completed an LLB at St. John's University Law School in Queens, and then failed the bar exam twice. So he set his sights on becoming one of J. Edgar Hoover's famed G-men, whom he most likely had heard about through movies, magazines, and comics. At the time, the FBI was rebranding itself as "a super police force to check the growth of organized crime"—heroes fighting evil and defending America through force of law and arms.<sup>17</sup> A career like that was probably seductive to Cassidy, who understood himself as a patriot and who saw the world in binary terms: there were good guys, bad guys, and no shades of gray. Yet it was a short distance from enthusiasm to desperation. On his FBI application, Cassidy stated that he would "accept the lowest entrance salary" and that he hoped to hear from the bureau within the week.<sup>18</sup>

The FBI did not reciprocate Cassidy's interest. Hoover's men were fully aware of the "fantasy identification" that drew men like Cassidy. The special agent who drew up Cassidy's psychological profile found the eager applicant

“an insipid personality” of “limited ability, lacking in initiative.” Almost with disgust, the agent noted that Cassidy was just five feet seven and a half inches tall and “wears a small waxed mustache.” Indeed, Cassidy “made an unfavorable impression” and had no observable “qualifications that might be useful” to the bureau.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably Cassidy was a better fit for the FBI than agents were willing to admit. He was in important ways not so different from J. Edgar Hoover, diagnosed by biographer Athan Theoharis with “authoritarian character disorder,” latent sadism, compulsive personality characteristics. Although he always denied the nickname publicly, he became known to his followers as “the little Führer.” The FBI’s Christian Front file recalls a telling occasion in Narrowsburg, New York. Front members were dining together casually when Cassidy entered the room; they “immediately arose, clicked their heels together, and greeted Cassidy in a typical Nazi salute with upraised arms.”<sup>20</sup>

Cassidy had authoritarian views to go along with his authoritarian personality—anything was acceptable, even brutal dictatorship, if it served as an obstacle to leftism. As Cassidy saw it, Nazism and Fascism were “the only forces that could stop Communism.” The Popular Front’s claim that Communism was the protector of democracy was simply a lie, Cassidy thought; the world was riven between two antidemocratic tendencies, and a moral person had to choose between them. “The majority of organizations in New York fighting ‘isms’ concentrate all of their efforts on Fascism and Nazism,” he complained, when in fact “Communism was the real menace to the nation.” The idea of securing democracy, whatever its substantive results, did not motivate him.

Alongside anti-Communism, Cassidy embraced anti-Semitism. In an ominous warning, he told the members of CACAC that “in their fight against Communism they must expect the cry of ‘anti-Semitism’ whenever they attack Communist leaders.” This was deft rhetoric, hardening followers against the logic of their own Judeo-Bolshevist myth-making and steeling them for battle in the arena of public opinion. What better way to deflect charges of anti-Semitism than to determine a priori that they could not be leveled in good faith?

Cassidy was everything Father Coughlin had dreamed of. Cassidy was, first and foremost, militant—and not in a metaphorical sense. “Communism in America has formerly been a battle of words,” he exclaimed in November 1938, “but now has become a battle of militant action.” When Cassidy thundered

that “only a Christian front will defeat Communism,” he was mating firmly the concept of a Christian Front with actual battle.<sup>21</sup> His Christian Front was not a roundabout form of Christian ecumenism. In Cassidy’s mind, the concept melded paramilitarism and Catholicism, specifically. Indeed, Cassidy’s Christian Front grew out of CACAC, a Catholic group that had been tottering on the edge of violence since its founding. So obvious was CACAC’s combativeness that police were detailed to the group’s inaugural meeting to prevent a riot.

Brooklyn’s Flatbush neighborhood, where CACAC emerged, was a hotbed not just of Catholic anti-Communism but also anti-Semitism. A case in point was Floyd A. Carridi, the grandstanding president of the Flatbush Anti-Communist League (FACL). “If the Jews in America don’t watch out,” Carridi announced just as the news of Kristallnacht emerged from Europe, “they will get the same treatment they got in Germany. I will lead the move against them, and we have guns.” An ACLU report distilled the FACL to its essence: “It can be said without fear that a major purpose [of the group] is to foster anti-Semitism.” Carridi routinely urged violence, once telling the audience at an outdoor Flatbush meeting that the platform he was standing on could be dismantled in about ten seconds and its parts used for bludgeons.<sup>22</sup>

Between Cassidy and Carridi, what was happening in Flatbush and all over Brooklyn was the merger of the Judeo-Bolshevist myth and a Roman Catholicism already suspicious of Jews. This was decidedly a spiritual and intellectual transformation: when they weren’t throwing punches or shouting fighting words, the speakers at these street meetings came across as deeply theological. “When Christ walked down the street with his cross on his back, dressed in tatters,” Carridi bellowed in a November 1938 speech, “they spat upon him and mocked him the same way they do it to you when you try to oppose Christian-baiting at a Communist meeting.” From Carridi’s perspective, it was important that Catholics see Christ in themselves, because this was the justification of their militancy. “They are trying to put you on the Cross,” Carridi said of Communists. “You possess the same human nature that Christ possessed,” he continued. “Christ rolled up his sleeves and he took out a whip and went around the temple with it . . . you can do everything that your leader, Christ did.” An ACLU report indicates that Carridi’s theological hollering was met with great applause. Cassidy spoke during the same meeting. “I am a Catholic,” he exclaimed. “My pledge—my heart to Rome—my body to America—my soul to God!”<sup>23</sup>

Father Coughlin shined his light on Cassidy rather than Carridi. Carridi's star may have dimmed when he was arrested by New York Police officers in October of 1938, whereas Cassidy appealed to Coughlin due to his public loyalty during the WMCA episode, his level of education, and his semiprofessional credentials. It is not clear precisely when Father Coughlin decided to formally commit to creating an organization called the Christian Front, but it was not much before March 1939, when Marcel Honore, the organization's nominal president, placed Cassidy in charge of the front's Brooklyn unit. Cassidy's coming-out party took place on March 9, when he arranged for a screening of the movie *Spain in Arms*. "A film 'made in Spain, not Hollywood,'" the producers claimed, would show "the International Brigade in action, burning churches and looting." Cassidy designed Christian Front insignia for the occasion and screened the film through July.<sup>24</sup>

Using authentic shots from the Spanish Civil War, "the film showed alleged shooting of a statue of Christ" by firing squad, "desecration of church figures, burning of sacred vestments, and the destruction of churches." As one filmgoer noted, these scenes "made the blood of the audience boil pretty highly." The appearance on screen of the hammer and sickle "drew loud boos." When Loyalist soldiers showed up in the film, an audience member jeered, "Tell Abie and Cohen to come back to Union Square!" The film was "a valuable emotionalizing agent," the anonymous observer wrote. "The average and sub-average individual" can "be emotionalized a great deal more from a visual instead of a verbal presentation."<sup>25</sup>

Cassidy also showed *Golgotha*, a film about the Crucifixion. Another anonymous observer stereotyped the audience as "a family affair" full of "women with rumps grown oversized through childbearing, children by the dozen, laboring men, red-faced, thick-wristed, and leather necked." It was "a coarse crowd, very coarse, and most of them impressionable, fanatic, religious . . . all of them bloodthirsty for Jewish blood." The audience seemed mesmerized by the "gory, miserable sickening sight of Christ carrying the cross."

*Golgotha* expressed the core messages of the Christian Front. *Golgotha* was a *religious* film with political messaging, much as the Christian Front viewed anti-Communism as a religious imperative—a papal imperative, even—that would be realized in the political realm. Cassidy, alongside theological mentors such as Coughlin and Curran, was filtering true Catholic teachings and biblical texts through the lens of a particular style of political activism. But this was not a matter as simple as distorting true Catholic

teaching. Rather, the Christian Front appropriated true Catholic teachings and left them intact while grafting their own view of Catholic activism on those teachings. “I daresay they have been faithful to the Biblical text,” the *Golgotha*-screening observer noted. The distortion lay in interpretations and additions inserted by the Christian Front and the propagandists it relied on.

The anonymous reporter’s review of *Golgotha* contained several examples, including Pontius Pilate greeting the on-screen crowd with what looked to be a Nazi salute. More significant was the crucifixion scene, which generated the strongest audience reaction. On the screen, “As the mob clamored for the crucifixion of Christ many a fist shot out in what was intended to be a parallel to the Communist salute.” The raised, clenched fist thus took on an “anti-God” symbolism. “Note the strategy,” the observer wrote. “Jewish people almost 2,000 years ago shooting out their fists, just as today they are accused of being behind the Communist movement.” The result was a novel and twisted religious belief, albeit one that had roots in long-standing Catholic anti-Judaism: “Jews—Communist Jews—crucified Christ. Jews—Communist Jews—are today trying to crucify Christianity.” Here was the old story of Jews as Christ killers transformed by, and into, the Judeo-Bolshevist myth. “It is no laughing matter with these people,” the observer concluded. “They believe it heart and soul.”

After *Golgotha* ended, the stage was turned over to Joseph E. McWilliams, leader of the Christian Mobilizers, a Christian Front-adjacent group in New York that shared the front’s militancy. “I heard the voice of our Savior in this film tonight,” he said softly and reverently to the assembled. “I was reminded of another voice—in Royal Oak,” the Detroit suburb where Father Coughlin was based. As the applause died down, McWilliams made the comparison explicit. Father Coughlin’s was “a voice which today is being persecuted as was the voice of Christ.”<sup>26</sup>

In comparing Father Coughlin to Jesus Christ, McWilliams was making a play for leadership of the Christian Front. A formidable speaker, if rather bombastic, McWilliams was also a well-organized activist. His Christian Mobilizers were picking up recruits throughout the spring of 1939, and he counted Father Edward Brophy, a so-called philosopher of the Christian Front, as a friend and supporter.<sup>27</sup> But the front’s designated leaders—Honor and Walter Ogden, the group’s first secretary-treasurer—were skittish about McWilliams. Not only did they keep him out of leadership, they even denied him membership. In December 1939, some months after McWilliams arrived

in New York, Ogden pointed him out to the FBI. It was, Ogden said, McWilliams's connections to the Ku Klux Klan in Texas that made him unfit for membership in the Christian Front. However, it is more likely that McWilliams was rebuffed because his Christian Mobilizers were tainted with law-breaking—two of the group's leaders had been convicted of inciting riots the previous summer. Both Ogden and Coughlin wanted to avoid any association with criminals, and they feared that their fledgling Christian Front would be swallowed up by the more publicly belligerent Mobilizers. Ogden described the McWilliams organization as “a very dangerous group of individuals and undoubtedly very pro-German.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, another possibility is that Cassidy simply did not want the competition from McWilliams. From early on, though Honore and Ogden were officially in charge, it was clear that Cassidy was Coughlin's general in New York, and he was not the kind of man to accept a challenge from the likes of McWilliams. Many who have written about the Christian Front view Cassidy as an interloper who bullied his way into leadership, bowling over the unsuspecting Ogden and Honore. But an official Christian Front letter signed by Ogden makes clear that he and Cassidy carried on a close working relationship from the group's earliest days and that Cassidy's authority was accepted by the front's nominal leadership. Postmarked February 16, 1939, Ogden's letter affirmed that Cassidy would be the membership recruiter for the Christian Front and that Cassidy's approval was necessary before a membership application could proceed upward to Ogden. As secretary-treasurer, Ogden officially welcomed recruits into the Christian Front, but the talent-spotting and gate-keeping were done by Cassidy. And Cassidy was good at his job. The FBI noticed that the Christian Front was growing “by leaps and bounds” all over New York in the spring of 1939. According to the bureau, membership numbers in New York City reached “3,000 to 4,000” by the summer. Cassidy was not Ogden's rival but rather a respected colleague, and by late summer the Brooklyn activist had severed ties with CACAC so that he could focus exclusively on the Christian Front. Cassidy was building the organization and, in the process, gaining the religious and social relevance he coveted.<sup>29</sup>

The actual membership tally of 1939 is impossible to confirm. Historian Daniel McInerney has estimated that “Christian Front membership peaked at 1,200,” a number that seems unlikely since an investigation by the New York City Mayor's Office concluded that there were “more than one thousand”

front members just in the New York Police Department. At the high end, an unsigned and unverified report from the American Jewish Committee claimed there were more than 38,000 fronters in the New York area alone. “Organizers have been sent throughout the Atlantic seaboard,” the report warned. Ogden confirmed the 38,000 number to the FBI. Whatever the case may be, the FBI put the figure at a tenth of that, while scholars are left to make educated guesses. Cassidy outfoxed the FBI—and posterity—by hiding all the Christian Front’s membership applications.<sup>30</sup>

Cassidy’s caution notwithstanding, the front must not be confused with a secret society. Its leaders were well known and made no efforts to shroud their identities; indeed, they were proud to announce themselves. Individual members were also expected to carry an official Christian Front identification card showing their photograph, while a second photograph was kept in the front’s files. As with most everything related to the Christian Front, transparency had a religious purpose. Since 1810 American bishops had banned membership in secret societies, prohibiting the reception of the sacraments by any Catholic who joined organizations with oaths of secrecy, such as the Masons. Membership transparency thus reconciled the Christian Front with Roman Catholic canon law. The front took pains to clarify its position, stating in one of its first explanatory pamphlets that it was “neither a Political Party nor a Secret Society.”<sup>31</sup>

In any event, the front was committed to growth and the publicity needed to achieve it. At one point Coughlin wrote in *Social Justice* that he hoped to expand the “national membership of the organization to 5 million before the summer and fall of 1940.” Coughlin, himself a massively popular public presence, made sure to promote Cassidy’s leading role to the world. According to the FBI’s December 1939 report on the front, in July of that year, “Cassidy visited Father Charles E. Coughlin in Detroit, Michigan, and represented that he (Cassidy) was the National Director of the Christian Front”; Coughlin apparently agreed, or at least associated Cassidy with the front’s ongoing success. “God bless John Cassidy and the Christian Front,” Coughlin declared in an amplified telephone call to a “wildly enthusiastic” crowd of 6,000 at an open-air meeting in Philadelphia on July 14.<sup>32</sup>

Syndicated columnist Dorothy Thompson captured the importance of the moment when she wrote that Coughlin “conveyed upon Mr. Cassidy the blessings of Almighty God.” Cassidy was now a Levite in the order of the Christian Front. Newly ordained in his semipriestly capacity, Cassidy wasted

no time in advancing the front to its next stage of militancy. “There is no law under the Constitution which prohibits a man from owning a gun,” Cassidy told the crowd in Philadelphia, “and there is no law that prohibits a man from belonging to a defensive organization.” Yet, by Cassidy’s own admission, the front was not interested in defense. “We must not wait until the Communists act,” he told his followers. “We ourselves must take the initial step.”<sup>33</sup>

### A Theological Call to Arms

Cassidy’s gun-talk in Philadelphia was a kind of opening salvo. A few more months would pass before the Christian Front actually began taking up arms. But only two weeks separated Cassidy’s speech from another by Father Coughlin, announcing the front’s theology of violence.

On July 30, 1939, Coughlin broadcast “The Popular Front vs the Christian Front.”<sup>34</sup> After revving up the engine of grievance with a discussion of a recent dust-up between himself and Mayor LaGuardia, Coughlin turned to the Spanish Civil War, the conflict foremost on the minds of the Lunns, the Vatican, and other forces popularizing the idea of a Christian Front. Spain’s Popular Front had tried to “tear down the cross and massacre Christians in the name of democracy,” Coughlin explained, but Franco saved the day. “There came a Franco. And when Franco came, there came the dissolution of your lost, diabolical cause,” Coughlin said. “And who composed Franco’s forces? I will tell you. It was the Christian Front.” Just as Franco’s Christian Front had saved Spain, so Coughlin’s Christian Front would save America. “The Christian Front is no longer a dream,” he accurately noted, it “grows stronger, and more determined.”

Echoing Cassidy’s prophylactic rhetoric against charges of anti-Semitism, Coughlin assured listeners that members of the Christian Front could expect nothing but hardship and persecution—but this made them Christlike: “Though the modern scribes and Pharisees will term you ‘Fascist’; though they will accuse you of stirring up the multitudes; though they maintain you consort with sinners—be they Nazi or anti-Semitic or what-not—were not more scurrilous epithets than these hurled at Jesus Christ?” Thus the way of the Christian Front would be the way of the cross. “If you are assailed or assaulted, be mindful that when He was spat upon, condemned, stripped of His garments and lashed at the pillar of injustice, He suffered patiently.”

At a first listen, it may be difficult to hear the call to arms in Coughlin's oratory. Even when he pointed out that "the Crusaders of old were Christians when they repulsed the Mohammedan hordes," he could have been speaking metaphorically, arguing for a militancy of head and heart that stopped short of combat. But many Catholics of the time would have recognized in Coughlin's words a theology not only permitting violence but compelling it. The strongest clue lay in his invocation of the Mystical Body of Christ. "Christianity does not teach that the Mystical Body of Christ shall submit to the body of Satan," Coughlin said.

How does announcing an ontological threat to the Body of Christ constitute incitement in the here and now? To answer that question, we have to look back to two major organizing principles of Roman Catholicism in the 1930s and 1940s. These were, first, the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ and, second, the ecclesiology of Catholic Action—an official exhortation from the Church that sacralized laypeople's social missions. These principles are no longer valid parts of Catholic doctrine—Mystical Body theology was dropped in the 1960s, by the Second Vatican Council—but when Father Coughlin called on them, they were dominant features of everyday life for American Catholics. Catholic leaders who did not share Coughlin's enthusiasm for anti-Communism would have been loath to contest his doctrines, based, as they were, in sound theological precepts. For the same reason, lay Catholics would have been highly susceptible to his message.<sup>35</sup>

Mystical Body theology piqued the interest of Pauline scholars between 1900 and 1920, then took off among the Catholic public in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> The power of the theology lay in its emphasis on the Church as a spiritual union forming the body of Christ. Through their participation in the sacraments—especially baptism—and their shared convictions, all Catholics constituted together the incarnation of Christ himself. Precisely why Mystical Body theology became such a powerful force when it did is hard to say with certainty, although one can immediately appreciate why such a vision, implying both human community and oneness with the divine, might offer emotional and spiritual nourishment to seekers. Historian Sally Dwyer-McNulty insightfully suggests that the changing technology of media was also key to Mystical Body theology's popularity: improved distribution transformed Catholic diocesan media into a national mass media, introducing Catholics across the United States to each other and to Catholic life globally. The result was a sense of connection to something larger than one's parish or diocese. Furthermore,

cheaper photography and printing meant this media could be “image-rich” and therefore depict Catholicism in the world, inspiring a sense of the weight and physicality of the Church.<sup>37</sup> The Church was no longer an abstract entity or voice from on high: any Catholic could literally see its presence, a presence of which he or she was a part.

Mystical Body theology had important implications for political action, as the exiled German political philosopher Eric Voegelin explained in a 1940 essay on Nazi race theory. Voegelin was concerned that Mystical Body theology supplied a number of symbols that easily slipped into Nazi ideology. He also focused on the transnational cohesion Mystical Body theology encouraged under the heading of *homonoia*, or like-mindedness. The “fraternal sentiment between the members of a symbolic group” gave Mystical Body theology its centripetal force, drawing Catholics inward toward unity. That sentiment left Christian Front members in Brooklyn painfully concerned about the welfare of their coreligionists in Spain—or, potentially, in any corner of the world. *Painfully* concerned—not intellectually. To be Catholic was not just to be particularly aware of the persecution of other Catholics but also to feel that persecution oneself.<sup>38</sup>

Father Coughlin came under the sway of Mystical Body theology well before he turned its symbols and doctrines into a justification for violence. He was also far from alone in seeing the potential for militancy within Mystical Body theology, a point worth keeping in mind as we try to grasp the breadth of ideological support for his mission. For example, in August 1938 John F. Noll, the bishop of Fort Wayne, Indiana, took to the pages of Coughlin’s *Social Justice* to argue that Pope Pius XI had encouraged Catholics to join a United Christian Front, which meant serving “as soldiers in the world-wide army of Christ as members of his Mystical Body.”<sup>39</sup>

Of course, there was, as Voegelin noted, a “tension between the body symbol and the social reality.” Organizations like the Christian Front salved that tension. They bridged the gap between symbol and social reality, spreading the ethos of global Christian unity and arguing that this ethos should govern action. The Christian Front was bold in its outreach on behalf of an activated Mystical Body theology. For instance, when the shooting war in Europe began in September 1939, the front put out an open letter to General George Marshall, chief of staff of the US Army, ghostwritten by Cassidy. Marshall was “the one man . . . who in the event of war, [would] be charged with the responsibility of conscripting an army to go across the seas

and murder our innocent Brothers-in-Christ,” Cassidy explained. “We, General, are Christians who believe in the Social Order ordained by Jesus Christ,” he continued. “Ours is a spiritual cause based on the Christian concept of the immortality of the soul. ALL MEN are our brothers in Christ.” Expressing the transnational nature of the Mystical Body, the letter concluded, “we will not murder them”—Europe’s Christians—“on any pretense that internationalism may invent.”<sup>40</sup>

Here Cassidy was engaged in a bit of hyperbole. If Mystical Body theology required pacifism toward fellow Christians, it did not imply the brotherhood of *all* men. Part of the danger of Mystical Body theology lay in its exclusivity. “Baptism constitutes our ‘naturalization’ into the Mystical Body of Christ,” Monsignor Fulton Sheen, a major figure of twentieth-century American Catholicism, wrote in 1935. Those who were not baptized were not of the body. Sheen, who joined Coughlin in projecting his ministry through radio and later television, made sure that his followers knew the limits of their spiritual community, which were also the limits of the Mystical Body. Coughlin explicitly translated spiritual into political limits. As he indicated in his “call to arms,” a Christian Front inspired by Mystical Body theology was to array itself against “the forces of the Jew, Karl Marx.”<sup>41</sup>

The role of baptism in Mystical Body theology enabled precise theological lines of demarcation between Catholics and Jews, and the conflation of Jews and Communists ensured that Jews would be targets of the anti-Communist crusade.<sup>42</sup> What the likes of Coughlin and Cassidy—and Cardinal Pacelli—were creating was a *theological anti-Communism*. Others have analyzed the Christian Front differently, as an agent of anti-Communist anti-Semitism, but this interpretation reduces the Christian Front to just another manufacturer of the Judeo-Bolshevist myth. The Christian Front did promote that myth, but so did non-Christians, Christians with nondoctrinal motivations, and Christians with doctrinal motivations unrelated to those of the front. To grasp what the front was and why it was so dangerous, we must attend to what made it distinctive: not the combination of anti-Communism and anti-Semitism but rather the fulsome embrace of mainstream Catholicism. The front was on a specifically Catholic mission inspired by teachings at the heart of the Catholic canon—teachings elaborated by ordained and respected clerics like Coughlin, Curran, and Sheen.<sup>43</sup>

While the Christian Front used the rhetoric of resistance and defense—defending the body of Christ from Judeo-Bolshevist assailants—its platform

was decidedly aggressive. Coughlin and the Christian Front recruited men who would be soldiers in a “platoon.” For instance, local organizers in Lowell, Massachusetts, mustered “Social Justice Platoons” to fight for Father Coughlin. Notably, the front’s theology encouraged Catholics to try to convert Jews, a matter of concern to Tillich and a marker of the ambition built into this more-than-defensive tendency.<sup>44</sup>

By late 1939 fronters were following in the footsteps of Hitler. Records of a September 1939 Christian Front meeting in New York note a comment from member Joe Leveque, who said “he would like to see the blood of Jews thrown over all the streets in America; that he wished to see Jewish blood stream all over the streets of America.” Nazi successes in the early weeks of World War II did nothing to protect Spanish Catholics, but they did leave fronters jubilant. “We Christians, especially Catholics, should exterminate the Jews just like Hitler did in Germany and is now doing in Poland,” Leveque concluded.<sup>45</sup>

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If Mystical Body theology motivated the substance of the Christian Front’s mission, Catholic Action protected the group from those within the Church who might have preferred that Coughlin, Cassidy, and their followers would disappear. Pope Pius XI defined Catholic Action as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.” In the eyes of the Church, Catholic Action included all of the social work of the institution, and the work of the institution included organized action receiving clerical approval. If lay Catholics took on a social project with the blessing of their local priest or bishop, that was Catholic Action. As Fulton Sheen put it, Catholic Action was “a *participation* in the organic life of the Church. . . . Meaningless apart from the hierarchy.”<sup>46</sup>

Catholic Action gave cover to the Christian Front whenever it faced controversy and even when it was seen as threatening to national security. Most bishops found dealing with the Christian Front perplexing precisely because, as a lay organization guided by Roman Catholic priests such as Coughlin and Curran, it was a definitive example of Catholic Action. Tillich was right to be skeptical that this lay-clerical nexus would remain untainted by anti-Semitism. A lay group had only to receive the support of an anti-Semitic priest in order to obtain official sanction for its project.

As a form of social mission responsive to the interests of lay Catholics, Catholic Action was bound to reflect the politics of the day. Thus, while not intrinsically focused on Communism, Catholic Action was a haven for anti-Communist efforts, and the whole program of Catholic Action began to be described as anti-Communist after 1940.<sup>47</sup> Clearly Catholic Action proponents at least paid close attention to Communist activities and learned from them, in the process redefining a religious practice as a political act. For instance, one popular handbook, printed in six editions in the 1940s alone, suggested that young Catholics create Catholic Action “cells,” mimicking the Communist cell structure. “Each morning cell members stand with Christ at the reenactment of His death and resurrection,” the handbook directed. When “cell members stand so intimately at the renewal of their redemption” they bring Catholic Action “into all social relationships.”<sup>48</sup>

Catholic Action was an important companion to Mystical Body theology in that both emphasized corporate, univocal efforts. Setting aside the fact that not all Catholics were anti-Communist, when an anti-Communist Catholic Action group undertook its work, it did so in the name of the whole Mystical Body. This was truly a dangerous situation, for all the reasons that Tillich identified. There was no way the Church hierarchy could intervene against the sort of fanaticism that Tillich and Martin D’Arcy warned about when that fanaticism belonged to the entire Church.

Also like Mystical Body theology, Catholic Action carried a martial undertone. “The Holy Spirit has come,” popular Jesuit pamphleteer Daniel J. Lord wrote in 1936, “and soldiers have been consecrated to warfare under Christ, the Captain.” “A great summons has gone forth,” Father Lord cried out, and those who “took up the standard of the Cross” were “to be soldiers, not in name only, but in fact and heroism, under the command of their captains, the bishops.” Lord viewed Catholic Action not as a movement but rather “a sacrament.”<sup>49</sup> With such a dubious mixture of ecclesiology and theology in place, Christian Front operatives in New York began to organize their own “sacramental cells.”

The pledge Cassidy wrote for new Christian Front recruits is a masterful melding of anti-Communism, Mystical Body theology, and the imperatives of Catholic Action. The pledge even incorporated a loophole allowing anti-Semitism. “I pledge myself to combat all attacks on the Christian Social Order,” each new recruit repeated, “even if by doing so, I may erroneously be branded ‘intolerant.’ . . . I promise to work by both word and action for the

destruction of Communism in America.” Chillingly, recruits also promised “to cooperate with those, who labor for the preservation of our American Republic, and if need be to defend it by force of arms.” Finally, in a grand gesture of faith, the recruit grasped a crucifix “as a symbol of willingness to devote all the energies of mind and all strength of endurance to the cause of Christ and Country.”<sup>50</sup>

Fired up by Cassidy’s and Coughlin’s calls, and certain of the rightness of Catholic Action on behalf of the Mystical Body, a New York Christian Front recruit made the first move toward paramilitarism all on his own. In mid-August 1939 Corporal Claus Gunther Ernecke of the 101st Cavalry of New York’s National Guard approached the leader of his troop’s machine gun platoon, Sergeant Henry Fischer. Speaking in a thick German accent, Ernecke asked Fischer if he would consider “instructing a group in the use of the Browning machine gun.” Fischer was rendered speechless by his fellow soldier’s request—the Browning was a serious weapon, a .30 caliber air-cooled machine gun that could shoot between 400 and 1,500 rounds per minute at a range of up to 1,500 yards. The astonished Sergeant Fischer wanted to know a little more about the “group” Ernecke intended him to train. All Ernecke would say was that it “was an organization formed to combat Communism” and that “he was very enthusiastic about the organization.” Ernecke later admitted the group was Cassidy’s Christian Front—“a more progressive organization” than all the other patriotic groups.<sup>51</sup>

The Christian Front had come a long way. No longer a vision of ecumenical anti-Communism in service of protecting Christians from persecution, it was now a Catholic-only organization whose “purpose . . . was to combat Communism and to eradicate Jews from public life.” So concluded FBI agent Peter Wacks, who investigated the Ernecke-Fischer exchange. The Christian Front as realized by Cassidy was far from defensive—it was “progressive,” as Ernecke put it, the kind of group that sought high-powered weapons whose only use was in killing people. Agent Wacks wrote that the Christian Front “allegedly . . . owns machine guns and rifles” and “allegedly secured 15,000 rounds of ammunition.”<sup>52</sup> Back on the Lunns’ cruise, Lord Dickinson had been adamant that “Christians need not use machine guns.” Inspired by mainstream Catholic teaching and urged on by priests, the men who joined the Christian Front had other ideas.