

CHAPTER 5

A Rather Bold Agitator

THE CHRISTIAN FRONT PLACARD IN FRANCIS MORAN'S OFFICE REPRESENTED more than a name change. It was also evidence of determined organizing. In some respects, Moran followed a playbook similar to Cassidy's. Both recruited largely from Catholic communities, where they found audiences steeped in Mystical Body theology. And the dubious claim of government censorship that stoked fevers in New York also moved the crowd in Boston.

But alongside the similarities, there were differences that contoured the paths the two Christian Front groups would walk. Most importantly, while Cassidy rapidly built up paramilitary capabilities and planned terrorist activities, Moran's approach was nonviolent. The process in Boston was also slower. Moran struggled for much of 1939 to make headway, then had enormous success in the fall. Cassidy also had the advantage of a New York press corps excited to drum up the story of right-wing activism. For Moran, news coverage was harder to come by. While New York journalists came to Cassidy for quotes, in Boston, even a grand spectacle attracted little coverage. The two men also had different strategies for motivating their flocks. Cassidy's events featured films and guest speakers, including numerous men of the cloth. Boston was the Moran show. Bostonians gathered by the hundreds to hear the lecturer of the Christian Front. The dais was Moran's native habitat, and so much the better because priestly support was often difficult to come by—except at a key September 1939 rally, where Moran still stole the show. And while the substance of Christian Front ideas was consistent

between New York and Boston—Mystical Body theology, Catholic Action, the phantom of Judeo-Bolshevism, and grievances against Spain's Popular Front were always the coins of the realm—in Boston, anti-Semitism was justified by lived experience rather than theory alone. The problem with Jews was not just that they supplied the Communist vanguard, but also that they were undermining livelihoods in the here and now. Apparently when Jews were not trying to undermine capitalism, they were cheating their way into its winners' column, or so Moran's supporters felt. Like their leader, frontiers in the Boston area were upset by the perceived role of Jews in putting them out of work during the Depression.

For the Boston Christian Front, the crash came in the spring of 1940. The arrests of the New York frontiers had little impact in Boston, but the trial itself resonated and inspired more focus from the FBI and opposing community organizations, particularly Jewish groups. Moran was forced to duck the limelight for a time. After the trial concluded with no convictions, Moran returned to public life, but his organization was on shaky footing. By summer, there was no telling what would come of the front in Boston. But what never wavered was Moran himself. He kept his passion and his wits. Above all, he kept his faith—in Coughlin, in the front, in his own ability, and in Christ.

Into the Arena

For most of 1939, the Committee for the Defense of American Constitutional Rights made scant progress. Moran needed to make a splash, both for his group and for himself. He had just found a place in public life via the Holmes commission, and the descent back into obscurity could have been no less rapid. For Moran, it was not enough to scribble strongly worded letters to politicians and newspaper editors. He wanted a profile, and he wanted to see the world remade according to his vision of the good. For help, he turned to the voice from Royal Oak.

The result was a massive success, as Moran and Father Coughlin organized events on a scale that quintupled any Christian Front meeting ever held in New York City. A September 8, 1939, Christian Front rally in Boston at Boston Arena reportedly attracted a crowd of between 8,000 and 12,000. Moran was joined on stage that night by Father Cyril Keating, Coughlin's adjutant and rectory-mate and a writer for *Social Justice*. Coughlin himself was piped in via telephone. Another Boston Arena event, on October 24, reportedly brought in at least 4,000 people to hear speeches by syndicated columnist and radio

host Boake Carter, Cassidy, and Moran. Moran advertised the mass meetings under the sponsorship of the Committee for the Defense of American Constitutional Rights, but when the night came, he was emphatic that it was the Christian Front that had brought out such celebrities.¹

For celebrities these were. Cassidy was now a nationally known figure, thanks to Coughlin's support and the attention of the New York media. As for Boake Carter, although forgotten today, he was one of the three most popular newscasters of the 1930s and was "familiar in almost every American household." In 1938 Carter was voted the nation's "most popular commentator" by readers of *Radio Guide*. He was also one of the first newscasters in America to have his own sponsor, Philco Electronics. Carter's style, novel at the time, was to read newswire releases dispassionately over the air, peremptorily introducing his own sardonic commentary into the staid stories. But his editorials could be cutting, and he picked fights with powerful enemies. Among these were John L. Lewis and the union body he helmed, the Congress of Industrial Organizations. In late 1937 "the CIO-led union that organized the Philco manufacturing plants grew weary of Carter's constant attacks on Lewis and the CIO." In one of the most bizarre moves in American labor history, the CIO helped to organize a boycott against Carter and Philco radios—the very product that CIO workers were manufacturing to earn their livelihoods. The boycott hurt Philco sales so badly that the company soon parted ways with Carter. Carter's isolationism and anti-New Deal rhetoric also alienated listeners; with his sponsorship dried up and ratings down, stations began taking him off the air. Yet, like Father Coughlin, Carter believed he was actually the victim of a conspiracy, forced from the dial by liberals within the Roosevelt administration. Thus Carter, too, became a free speech enthusiast, even though the government was not involved in the private decisions of the broadcasters that deserted him. As early as May 1938 he was headlining a Christian Front-sponsored Great Pro-American Mass Meeting at Carnegie Hall, where spoke on the topic "free speech and the news."²

In October 1939 Moran, the master of ceremonies, had no compunctions about compelling expression. He opened the evening by instructing the crowd stand and salute the flag as the Star-Spangled Banner played. "I trust that none of you will refuse to salute the flag," Moran stated. "I recognize your rights as citizens, but I demand that those who do not intend to salute the flag leave the hall." Then, issuing a veiled threat of violence, he told the audience, "Look around you and if they refuse to leave ask officers to give a little help."

Carter used his time to bellow about the National Association of Broadcasters' (NAB) new broadcasting code. Carter called out the NAB for infringing free speech, since its code banned editorializing while reading a news report. There was more heft to this complaint than Carter's earlier ones, as the NAB, though a private organization, was creating federally enforceable standards. The Communications Act of 1934 had established the radio airwaves as a kind of public utility, which the federal government was empowered to regulate, and the NAB was drawing up the rules on behalf of the new Federal Communications Commission. "The party in power in Washington has thoroughly abused the freedom of radio in the United States," Carter insisted, arguing that Democrats were clipping the wings of any news-caster who was against America entering the war in Europe.

After Carter, Cassidy took the stage to rail against Communism. "Jail is too good for Earl Browder," Cassidy declared, referring to the leader of the Communist Party of the United States. Cassidy's speech foreshadowed his cockamamie paramilitary doctrine of false-flag operations and defensive counterattack. "Communists plan to use the next general strike to start a revolution," he thundered to the Boston crowd, adding that he would like "every one of them kicked out of the land."³

Moran spoke next. While Cassidy spent his time on stage issuing political dicta and castigating Communists, Moran led what was apparently a raucous religious celebration, but because coverage of the October event was so minimal, little is known of what was said. We do know that Moran also took up the theme of censorship, announcing from the stage that, once again, Coughlin had been taken off the airwaves in Boston. This was false: Coughlin had never been forced from any Boston stations, although after the controversy surrounding his 1938 Kristallnacht speech, he had agreed to stay off the radio for a few weeks. He then returned to record-setting audiences, with plenty of complaints about his supposed removal. As for the situation in fall 1939, just two weeks before the October rally, Coughlin had renewed his contract with WAAB in Boston. Moran had arranged for 500 picketers to "protest against the ruling curtailing Father Coughlin's radio broadcasts," yet there was no such ruling. No matter, Moran lied to the Boston Arena crowd, claiming that he personally had arranged for Father Coughlin to resume his Sunday afternoon radio talks in Boston. The announcement met with stormy applause.⁴

We know more details about the September rally, thanks to a nuanced account written by one Eugene Smith, a part-time Congregational minister

in attendance. Smith found the Christian Front's anti-Semitism concerning, so he made a point of bearing witness and recording his thoughts. What Smith saw and heard disturbed him deeply, and after the New York arrests, he shared his rally notes with the FBI, which preserved them.

From the start, Smith wrote, "anticipation and subdued excitement pervaded the air," and "the floor and both galleries were filled." Massive speakers stretched from floor to ceiling. The program began with a large assembly of musicians, "boys and girls from twelve to sixteen" years old, marching onto the floor by the colors—an American flag and a large blue Christian Front flag. The band played "God Bless America" while children carried placards high above their heads. "CHOKER THE VULTURE COMMUNISM," "TEAR DOWN THE WEB OF LIES," "DRIVE OUT THE POISONOUS REPTILE," and "KEEP US OUT OF WAR," the placards read.

Smith was taken with Moran, who moved effortlessly on stage, passionately orating in front of thousands. Moran opened the event declaring that "Father Coughlin is the greatest American in the United States today." When the cheers died down he pledged, "My organization is at his entire service." As for Father Cyril Keating, who took the stage after Moran, Smith thought he was "eloquent and handled the audience with power." Keating spoke for forty-five minutes. "I have lived and eaten with Father Coughlin," Keating shouted, "there is not a lazy bone in his body." "He gets no money from neither big business nor Russia nor Nazi Germany. Father Coughlin wants to apply Christian economics to this country. Are you ready for it? Father Coughlin is *always* right! HE IS THE TRUTH! ARE YOU WITH HIM?" Although, according to every Christian denomination, only Jesus Christ is to be referred to as "the truth," the crowd "cheered Keating with shouts of YES!"

"We need more workers for Father Coughlin and the Army of the Kingdom of God," Keating declared, doubling down on Coughlin's personal divinity. Then Keating led the crowd in hypnotic repetitive cheers:

**ARE YOU READY? ARE YOU READY TO FIGHT FOR
SOCIAL JUSTICE?**

**ARE YOU READY TO GET NEW SUBSCRIBERS FOR
SOCIAL JUSTICE?**

**WHAT DO YOU SAY? SAY IT AGAIN! ARE YOU READY
TO FIGHT?**

Excited cries of affirmation filled the arena as Father Keating took his place in the growing pantheon of priests advocating for the Christian Front.

Before leaving the stage, Keating flattered the audience. Father Coughlin “often spoke of the courageous works of the priests and laity of Boston” and “read every letter” sent to him from New England. Then Keating concluded with an invocation of Mystical Body theology, albeit in twisted fashion: “We belong to the same Church of which he is part of the Head; we are all the members and all bound to one another!” Keating cried. But Keating was referring to Coughlin, not Christ. In Keating’s mind, and perhaps in the arena that night, Christ was secondary to Coughlin.⁵

We do not know what Coughlin himself told the audience, because Reverend Smith left Boston Arena just as Moran was preparing the closed-circuit connection. Smith could not stand listening to the voice from Royal Oak. All he heard of the speech was “a metallic cracking, low at first, and raucous continuance.” Smith quickly walked home and wrote down his thoughts. “The Christian Front movement in this nation is very dangerous,” he believed. “Father Coughlin has started a fire.” Smith was blown away by “the loyalty of the audience; their emotional intensity,” and “the power of Father [Keating] to arouse people, to sweep them onward without questions or critical thinking.” Smith was still “more impressed with the words of Mr. Moran, chairman of the evening.”

In closing, Smith described the rally as “Father Coughlin’s coup in Boston.” The minister seemed to understand that virtually nothing would be done to contest the forces Coughlin and Moran were unleashing. “The city has literally no knowledge of what occurred here.”⁶

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As ominous as the rallies were, there was an even more sinister coda. While Cassidy was speaking in Boston, his group was very likely training with two Browning machine guns stolen from a nearby armory. The released Christian Front FBI file reveals information that never arose at the New York trial, even though this information was in the bureau’s possession months before the proceedings began: on October 27, 1939, less than a week after the Boston rally where Cassidy effectively laid out his paramilitary doctrine, New York frontier William Bishop told FBI informant Denis Healy that “two Browning Light Machine Guns had been stolen from armories in Boston.” The guns,

Bishop said, were “at present time in cold storage” and would be used “for firearms training” in the future. During their raids, FBI agents found 750 rounds of Browning ammunition but no machine guns. Yet here was one of the defendants boasting to the FBI that the front had stolen the guns from the National Guard, just as prosecutors initially alleged before setting aside a charge they claimed they could not hope to prove.⁷

Word of the guns got out on the street, if not in the courtroom. By late January 1940, after the arrests but before the trial began, rumors were circulating in New York about machine guns gone missing in Boston. Newshounds linked the lost machine guns to the Irish Republican Army. To quell these rumors, the FBI deceived the media, telling the Associated Press that “no National Guard Arms had been reported missing” in Boston. That was technically true—the National Guard had not reported any lost guns—but also misleading.⁸

Healy’s finding was recorded in Agent Peter Wacks’s December 1 report, which was forwarded to Boston on December 7. Yet it would take nearly two additional months before Boston agent J. D. Noble notified his boss, Special Agent Virgil Peterson, that “two Browning automatic rifles . . . serial nos. 105707 and 29188” were “reported missing from the National Guard Armory in Waltham, Massachusetts,” a Boston suburb. Neither Peterson nor E. J. Connelley—the New York special agent in charge, who learned from Wacks about the missing guns—mentioned the matter to Hoover or his deputy, Edward Tamm. Nor did anyone ever inform the Boston Police that two high-powered machine guns were lost in the area.

The Boston FBI office ignored the forwarded Wacks report, probably because its contents were described as “information” rather than actionable intelligence. Only after an unnamed Boston FBI agent heard separately about missing guns did the office follow up. The unnamed agent’s source was a guardsman at Battery G, in Falmouth, Massachusetts. On January 19, 1940, the guardsman casually told the agent that “a few months ago he was at the Armory in Natick”—another Boston suburb—“and heard rumors that while returning from maneuvers the National Guard lost two machine guns from a truck.” Upon further investigation, the agent learned that the guns had indeed gone missing but had already been returned.

It turned out that the guns were known to be missing since at least mid-September. The guns had first left the armory in Waltham on July 12, when Captain Archie McFayden turned them over to Federal Caretaker William

Marshall at the Charlestown National Guard facility. The guns were to be stored in Charlestown while Waltham's National Guard company was out on maneuvers. Around September 15, Captain McFayden asked Marshall to return the guns, but Marshall replied that he had already done so. Presuming that the guns had incorrectly wound up in Natick, McFayden inventoried the armory there but could not find them. Finally, on December 3, Marshall delivered gun 1057072 to McFayden. "Bipod missing, bolt missing, barrel very dirty," McFayden noted. The next day, Marshall appeared again, this time with gun 29188 "in good condition." Noble wrote, "Captain McFayden could not state where the rifles were located from the middle of September to December 4, 1939." Those dates synched with Christian Front target practices. Neither McFayden nor Marshall ever informed their superiors or notified law enforcement.

How exactly Marshall came to possess the stolen guns is unknown. He refused to talk when approached by the FBI investigator, and McFayden had little to add. McFayden told the agent that "he did not consider Marshall to be the type of man who should be a caretaker," but at the same time said that the incident "should be kept confidential." McFayden "did not want to go on record," since the incident would "not sit well with [his] Colonel." Pressed by the FBI investigator, McFayden refused "to quote any acts of Caretaker Marshall." The guardsmen were clamming up and covering up to protect themselves from military discipline, at the very least. Whether they had any other interests—whether, for instance, either was in league with or at least sympathetic to the Christian Front—is a matter entirely for speculation.

The Boston FBI field office concluded that "inasmuch as rifles Nos. 105707 and 29188 were missing from the place they were supposed to be, it is possible that they were stolen and returned."⁹ What this meant was that, more than likely, William Bishop's enthusiastic note to Cassidy was true: the Browning light machine guns *were* rattling and echoing along the sides of the Allegheny Mountains in West Virginia in fall 1939. The upshot of the machine gun caper was that as John Cassidy stood in Boston Arena in late October 1939 spewing his harebrained rhetoric about a Communist revolution in the United States, at least two military-grade, combat-ready machine guns were missing from an armory in a neighboring town, and these guns almost certainly were in the Christian Front's possession—with Cassidy's knowledge. The police and the public had no idea, of course, and neither did the rally's

organizer. Moran did not know he was taking the microphone from a revolutionary planning a religiously motivated terrorist attack.

At that moment, Moran was flying high. He would spend a few more months soaring, before the New York trial changed his fortunes again.

Building a Base

From September 1939 until January 1940, the Christian Front was booming in New England. During this period, Moran organized Christian Front groups in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and Hartford, Connecticut.¹⁰ In Lowell, Massachusetts, a so-called Social Justice Platoon convinced the city council to “go on record . . . protesting the action of the National Association of Broadcasters,” which was seen as prohibiting the discussion of controversial subjects on the air. “Several hundred persons crowded the city council chamber at City Hall.” Moran took the floor to argue that “if such subjects were to be banned, it was the public’s duty and not that of the radio operators,” a contention that goes some distance in clarifying his eccentric understanding of free speech. His frequent complaint of censorship by private corporations appears nonsensical, but perhaps Moran believed that in fact the state had every right to suppress speech. It was *only* private entities, maybe specifically press entities, whose actions could be said to violate constitutional rights of free expression. As discussed below, Moran defended this position even when challenged to consider its authoritarian character. Of course, it may also be that Moran had no coherent views on free speech and simply argued for whatever was politically expedient. In any case, the Lowell resolution passed unanimously, irking the highest levels of the NAB.¹¹

Two weeks after the Boston Arena rally, Moran traveled to Pawtucket, where he shared the stage with Father Curran. At that event, Moran referred to the president as Mr. “Rosenfelt,” described his administration as “anti-Christian,” and insinuated that “first lady Eleanor Roosevelt frequently visited CPUSA headquarters.” Moran also “charged the President with treason in connection with the alleged sale of United States military secrets to foreign governments.” “The audience was in accord with the speaker,” one spectator noted of the thousand-strong Pawtucket crowd.¹²

An observer from Boston’s Jewish Community Relations Council who infiltrated a Christian Front meeting the day before the Pawtucket rally offered a possible reason for the crowd’s allegiance to Moran. “Most of them

are in very poor circumstances,” the writer noted. “They are against the present economic order because they can’t get what they want and seem to find within this group a chance to ‘strike’ at the person or persons whom they believed responsible for their plight.”¹³

Economic grievance was indeed essential to Moran’s success, in particular that of his anti-Semitic message. This is evident in an early 1940 FBI encounter with Christian Front supporters in Lynn, Massachusetts, a city north of Boston. The Lynn fronters described themselves less as members of an organization than as a “roundtable” of Coughlinites who “also attended the meetings in Boston of the Christian Front held by Francis Moran,” where “the principles of social justice . . . and the doctrines of Father Coughlin” were discussed. FBI Special Agent Edward Boyle met with several of the Lynn fronters after one of them, an insurance agent and “ardent Catholic” named Thomas Feeney, reached out to law enforcement in the wake of the New York arrests.¹⁴

Feeney explained to Boyle that Moran’s speeches “were instructions on the economic encyclicals of popes Pius XI and Leo XIII.” Moran talked about “Communism and its evils and encouraged the audience to watch out for it and fight against it.” What Boyle gathered was that “Communism is discussed as a spreading evil,” and there was “no specific anti-Semitism except insofar as it [was] connected with Communism.” Boyle noted that Feeney and the other Lynn fronters he met seemed “anti-Jewish,” but the FBI agent decided that this sentiment was grounded in the economic realities of Lynn: “Jews had driven all the good Christians out of business in Lynn.” Feeney and two Lynn compatriots who met with Boyle, Frank Harney and Dr. Charles Flood, all “cited hearsay cases” about Jews. “Harney had been a former shoe manufacturer in Lynn, producing 2000 to 2500 shoes a day before the World War,” but “when the war came he was drafted, was forced to close down his factory, and as a consequence he suffered the loss of several thousand dollars. After the war, he came home and the Jews had his business.” Harney “had not been able to break into the business again because of the Jews.” As far as Harney was concerned, he, like Moran, had been economically displaced by Jews—and for doing his patriotic duty.

Agent Boyle seems to have been quite taken. His report downplayed the potential danger of the front and its sympathizers, asserting that these were just “the opinions of a few men” who belonged to “no real organization.” Feeney, Harney, and Flood “were happy to see that at least one man, Francis Moran, had the courage to get up and talk social justice along Christian lines.”

Boyle added that “the men had a high opinion of Moran,” claiming “he is a very intellectual man with high principles and an earnest purpose to instruct the people in the subversive doctrines being disseminated around them, and to warn them of the same.”¹⁵

Moran was winning support by proposing that the struggle against poverty was not a political one, as the Communists would have it, but rather a religious one. Driven by Coughlin’s interpretation of Catholic social justice as a mission on behalf of Christians exclusively, Moran sought to counter Judeo-Bolshevism with what Keating called “Christian economics.” That did not mean promoting economic systems inspired by Christian teaching but instead protecting the financial interests of Christians. The good life was for the faithful.

As a “kitchen-table” activist, concerned with the welfare of Christians in the here and now, Moran had a message that appealed beyond the ranks of leading citizens and the exceptionally pious. It should therefore come as no surprise that his big tent welcomed a great many women, who of course were no less attuned to economic hardship than men were. Indeed, many far-right Catholic movements of the 1930s and 1940s counted large numbers of women supporters. Historian Glen Jeansonne pointed out that Father Coughlin “attracted thousands of female supporters, and women joined the Coughlin-influenced Christian Front.” Elizabeth Dilling, the anti-Communist speaker and author who shared the podium with Father Curran at the 1938 Pro-American Rally, was a leader in the National Legion of Mothers of America, which billed itself as a patriotic organization and counted a membership between 5 and 6 million by 1941.¹⁶

Moran seems to have exhibited the same level of magnetism for Catholic women as Father Coughlin, perhaps more. “These women work their heads off for Moran,” one confidential source reported to the FBI, who suggested that the women had “come under his spell.” Marie Ballem of Winthrop, Massachusetts, wrote to *America* magazine, “I spent every spare moment of my time after work selling [*Social Justice*] and opening up new districts.” Ballem was interested in helping financially one “boy with a wife and child who had been discharged from Jordan Marsh Co. department store because he was seen selling *Social Justice* on Washington Street beside rabid Communists and socialists sent out by the General Jewish Council.” Here was a Catholic woman who understood full well the Judeo-Bolshevist menace to working-class America.¹⁷

An FBI confidential source seemed to think that Moran's celibacy played into his mystique and provided a modicum of sex appeal. One "woman said that she always thought M. was giving his life up to do this big work." The source predicted that if Moran ever got married the other Christian Front women would become "angry."¹⁸ There is, however, every reason to believe that Moran's women supporters were primarily interested in his views and arguments, not his hand in marriage. It is not as though women were on the sidelines of far right generally, participating only to find suitable husbands or facilitate enterprises cherished mainly by the men in their lives. Recall Sybil Holmes, the champion red-baiter of the Massachusetts State House, who justified anti-Communism on the basis of Christian devotion and allied with Moran more than once. And there was Dilling, very much out front, who could likewise count on Moran's support. In early 1941 Moran spoke out on behalf of Dilling and her women colleagues who were then protesting the passage of the Lend-Lease Act, which built on President Roosevelt's cash-and-carry scheme and enabled further US support of belligerents in the wars in Europe and Asia. Moran thundered to an audience of reportedly 60 percent women that "hundreds of other women, mothers, who had made great sacrifices to come to Washington and protest the atrocities of the Lend-Lease Bill were not permitted to speak even to their representatives."¹⁹

Dilling and Moran both argued for isolationism not only because they opposed alliance with Britain and later the Soviet Union against the Nazis, but also in support of Christian pacifism, inspired by the fabulously high casualty rates of World War I. For the mothers, Christianity could save the nation from Communism, and Christian pacifism could save their sons from what they considered a pointless—even counterproductive—sacrifice.

Exercising Influence

During fall 1939 Moran was generating high-profile protests, gaining publicity, gathering a core of supporters, and encouraging public debate. Contrariwise, Cassidy's New York outfit was street-fighting and becoming more truculent in its anti-Semitism. Cassidy was pursuing militarism, while Moran was focused on an intellectual exhortation of the faithful. And while the likes of Carridi in New York were openly anti-Semitic, Moran and other organized right-wing New England Christians kept their anti-Semitism behind closed doors, or else they filtered it through economic griping. The result was a more

genteel anti-Semitism in New England—less publicly antagonistic but more insidious behind the veil of supposedly legitimate grievance.²⁰

Moran worked hard to build on the momentum of the huge September and October rallies. The moment was opportune, as the public's interest in isolationism and pacifism was increasing in response to the war in Europe, which had recently begun with Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1. At a meeting with 800 Christian Front members in Roxbury's Hibernian Hall on November 8, Moran bragged that "we are doing very well in Lawrence, Lowell, Providence, and Lynn," but he was not content to rest on his laurels. "It is essential that chapters be formed in Roxbury, Roslindale, Dorchester, and other sections of Boston," he explained. Priests in New Hampshire were cooperating but "in a very quiet way." Boston clergy were more trepidatious, but Moran thought they would "come forth when the proper time arises." Calling upon the supranational character of the Mystical Body, Moran concluded, "We are not going to get caught napping as we were in Spain."²¹

From Madrid to the mills of Lowell and Lynn, from Barcelona to Boston, Moran was continuing the fight for Christ. He took the fight to Washington, too, putting pressure on one of the giants of twentieth-century Massachusetts politics: John W. McCormack, who represented a Boston district in the US House and would go on to become speaker of the House in the 1960s. By 1939 McCormack was a major player in federal politics, on the brink of becoming the House majority leader. He was also vacillating on renewal of the Neutrality Act. If passed, the bill would end the US munitions embargo against belligerents in Europe and replace it with cash-and-carry, marking a giant step away from isolationism. On September 18 Coughlin called on his followers to inundate Washington with telegrams and letters of protest. The response was immense. A whopping 256,000 extra pieces of mail flowed into the US Senate in the week after Coughlin's appeal, and 400,000 extra pieces slammed the House. It is a testament to Moran, who mobilized the Coughlinites in Boston, that McCormack alone received 20,000 of these letters. Largely in opposition to renewal, the letters had a strong Catholic imprint and came from parishioners and priests alike.²²

Moran also threw his weight around in the broadcast war. "A local radio program is of prime necessity," he wrote to all New England Christian Front members on October 6, 1939. "We must go to those people who will not come to us." Behind the scenes, Moran was trying to do just that, working with another giant of twentieth-century Massachusetts politics: the "Rascal King"

James Michael Curley, recently departed from the governor's office but soon to be restored as Boston's mayor, for the fourth time. In the critical weeks after the outbreak of war in Europe, Moran teamed up with Curley to try to purchase Boston's WAAB.²³ WAAB was a key radio station, its signal blanketing metropolitan Boston. The venture may have marked a first attempt at creating an all-right-wing station, a concept that would not be realized until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Moran believed strongly in the need to counter what he considered Jewish control of local media; Curley's interest is less clear, though surely he would have appreciated access to a friendly outlet. As fate had it, WAAB had just spent \$25,000 (the equivalent of \$440,000 in 2020 dollars) refurbishing its studio in Central Square, Cambridge, putting the sale price out of reach for Moran and Curley.

With his radio venture off the table, Moran found his next target in Alfred Duff Cooper, a Tory politician and former first lord of the British Admiralty who spent fall 1939 touring the United States, delivering lectures in which he urged Americans to stand up to the Nazis. Cooper was internationally known as a hawk and a man of unusual political courage, who had resigned his cabinet post in opposition to the Munich Agreement appeasing Hitler. Cooper "was featured prominently in Nazi propaganda as one of the three most dangerous Tory warmongers," according to historian Michael Stenton. All this made Cooper a conspicuous adversary for the Christian Front and other anti-Semitic isolationists, who claimed his intervention in the US scene was a ploy by Jewish bankers to push the country into Europe's war. As Cooper's Boston visit neared, Moran stoked such sentiments, while playing up anti-British views within the heavily Irish-American Christian Front.²⁴

"This is Great Britain's war, and we are not going to grab the hot chestnuts out of the fire for them," Moran declared at the November 8 Hibernian Hall gathering, which served as a planning meeting for Cooper's arrival in Boston later that month. Cooper's tour had begun in September, giving Bostonians plenty of time to prepare. One idea Moran threw out to the crowd was to "have three men dressed in costumes representing the Spirit of '76 walking back and forth—with fifes—and a drum. Also, a wounded soldier with [a World War I American Expeditionary Force] band on his arm." Moran, always shrewd, wanted to take advantage of Irish bitterness without appearing provincial, which would limit the appeal of his message. So he primed the front with universalist arguments. "We have great sympathy for the people of England, France, Germany, and India—for their governments are not true

democracies,” Moran intoned. “But this is their battle.” Moments like these demonstrated a kind of rhetorical genius, as Moran managed to strike a pose of principle while disclaiming any US interest in the war, reminding listeners of odious British imperialism, and suggesting that nothing separated Britain and Germany politically.²⁵

Cooper spoke at Boston’s Symphony Hall on November 28. Moran mustered only fifty picketers outside, but what happened inside the hall was more significant. “Before Duff Cooper finished, the entire Hall was in an uproar,” an FBI source from the Anti-Defamation League recalled. Cooper, joined by his elegant wife Lady Diana Manners, faced what the *Boston Herald* described as a “barrage of hostile questions.” “How about Palestine? What about India? What is England doing with the Arabs?” rang from the balcony, while the hecklers meticulously kept clear of the Irish question. The final jab of “we’ll just settle for the war debt” raised some chuckles among the otherwise tense crowd. In his autobiography Cooper lamented the “organized opposition” he encountered on his tour, mentioning Boston specifically. Demonstrating his own prejudice, he blamed “the embers of the ancient Irish feud,” a comment that absolved the British of responsibility for ongoing oppression of the Irish while reimagining a long-standing and one-sided policy of dispossession as a sort of family tiff in which all parties were equally at fault. For its part, Boston’s upper crust was embarrassed by the outbursts in the gilded confines of Symphony Hall. The *Boston Globe* reported that “the leaders of Boston Society” were “generally sympathetic” to Cooper’s speech, and in his autobiography Cooper thanked Bostonians who “came to apologize for the tone of some of the questions that had been asked.”²⁶

Moran was only too happy to annoy Cooper and “the leaders of Boston Society,” but he did not want merely to rouse the rabble. That was the New York model, full of street picketing and fisticuffs. Moran hoped to be a little more sophisticated. So it was that in the early afternoon of January 14, 1940, Moran found himself sitting at the Boston Community Church on Byron Street, on a panel with Doctor A. G. Dieffenbach, religion editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, and Reverend W. Ellis Davies of the Unitarian church in Wollaston, Massachusetts. It was Moran’s first visit to the progressive Boston Community Church, a Unitarian-Universalist congregation under the direction of the minister Donald G. Lothrop. Lothrop had a reputation for inviting controversial speakers into his church. These included speakers on all sides, whether Moran or the Communists Lothrop “warmly welcomed all . . . to

his congregation,” leading to widespread speculation that he was himself a Communist.²⁷

Before an audience of more than a hundred, the panelists debated the following question: “Should Communists and Nazis Have the Constitutional Rights of Freedom of Speech, Press and Assembly?” Moran “spoke with absolute directness and frankness of his personal attitude toward the Constitution.” Agitating Lothrop, who served as moderator, Moran indicated that progressives and progressive organizations “are a part of Communism without knowing it.” Moran argued that Nazis, Fascists, and Communists all should be denied constitutional protections because they were revolutionary agitators. How could those who wished to eliminate the United States be protected by its Constitution, Moran wondered. Moran wanted to see “a bureau within the central government” decide which citizens had constitutional rights: “What [the federal government] said was wrong would be wrong, what they said was all right I would permit.” Lothrop challenged Moran, asking, “Is not this about what Hitler has now in Germany?” According to one of the attendees, “Moran smiled pleasantly and shrugged his shoulders.”²⁸

Within twenty-four hours, the New York Christian Front raids were making headlines, and the time for pleasant smiles was over.

Persistence

“Francis P. Moran, 31, organizer of an autonomous Christian Front in New England claiming a membership of 20,000, was ‘astounded’ last night when informed” of the arrests. “Good heavens,” Moran gasped as the *Boston Globe* reporter explained that Cassidy and his group were accused of sedition. As far as Moran was concerned, the very notion was impossible. The purpose of the Christian Front, he told the paper, was “to uphold the Constitution,” since “the Constitution is based on the principles and moralities of Christian civilization.” Moran made every effort to distance himself from whatever was happening in New York. “I can assure you, there has never been and never will be any talk about bombings in New England,” he protested, adding that he was no bosom buddy of the New York leader—he “knew Cassidy very slightly.” Moran also defended the Christian Front against the “false allegation” of anti-Semitism. “We have denounced the leadership of Jewish radicals,” Moran clarified, promising that there was no anti-Semitism in the good fight against Judeo-Bolshevism.²⁹

What to do now? Moran had three choices. He could close shop, go underground, or continue organizing publicly—a dicey proposition given that law enforcement might be coming for him. The day after news of the arrests broke, the *New York Times* was predicting “Saboteur Arrests in Boston.” Yet Moran persisted, and in full view. It is in some ways an astonishing decision but also in keeping with Moran’s history and commitments. He tangled with politicians, but he understood his work as religious, and there was no end to faith, or else it was no faith at all. What is more, to forswear the Christian Front would be a second black mark, a second failure to follow his vocation after his departure from the seminary. He would be a failure in the eyes of his community, which saw him as a spiritual leader. And he would be a failure in the eyes of God. This was another teaching of Mystical Body theology, which enjoined Catholics to endure any hardship. As the Dominican Order’s Thomas A. K. Reilly wrote in *America* during World War I, “The mystery of the Cross”—a symbol emphasized by Mystical Body theology in particular—“lures stalwart souls through faith to the top of the narrow way.” Reilly was demanding of the body of the Church “an extreme or consummation of perseverance” on behalf of the divine.³⁰ For Moran, maintaining the Christian Front was undoubtedly a choice for Christ.

Moran would follow his religious discernment into the teeth of the national security apparatus. Fortunately for him, that apparatus still was not focused on his group. As we have seen, Peterson, the special agent in charge of the FBI’s Boston office, had not even heard of the Christian Front before Moran visited him in the wake of the New York arrests. And even after the arrests, the FBI thought Moran’s followers were simply opinionated people with “no real organization.” The press also continued to give Moran a pass. The initial bad publicity subsided quickly, and the papers did little to link Moran with the seditionists a few hours away. Henry Levy, New England regional secretary of the American Jewish Committee, wrote to his New York counterparts, “The tie-up between the Boston and New York [Christian Front] office should have been made clearer by the papers.” Evidently there were some papers that actively refused to draw the connection: a Levy associate inside the Hearst newspaper chain insisted that the company would not poke Coughlin by suggesting that he was the spiritual leader of a nationwide terrorist organization. “Pressing the tie-up between Detroit, Boston, and New York,” was impossible “from the standpoint of religion and good business,” Levy lamented.³¹

Moran's plan at this point was to keep on doing what he had been doing. Thus on January 18, 1940, just three days after the arrests and on the day he spoke with Peterson, Moran kept a scheduled speaking engagement at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Somerville. The evening, which was sponsored by 200 male Coughlin supporters who billed themselves as the United Minute Men, was an opportunity for Moran to present the aims of the Christian Front to an audience of sympathetic nonmembers. He also used the occasion to distance his loyal New Englanders from the New York seditionists. Moran "made a long speech explaining the motives and purposes of his organization . . . warning of the dangers of Communism."

Suddenly, one of the attendees spoke up. "I should like to say a word," he interjected. It was Lothrop, ready to refute Moran at one of his own assemblies. "You, Francis P. Moran, spoke at my church last week, tonight I would like to speak at your meeting." Taking the floor, Lothrop despaired "the use of the term Christian Front by so un-Christian a group." He accused the Christian Front of being anti-Semitic, tied to the New York seditionists, and beholden to Father Coughlin. Moran denied every allegation. Lothrop then read what looked to be a prepared statement citing historical evidence. But Moran refused to engage. "I defy you to show any proof of Father Coughlin's connection," Moran said, splitting hairs. He acknowledged that he was personally in contact with Coughlin but protested the claim that Coughlin had any relationship to the Boston Christian Front, specifically. An operative of Boston's Anti-Defamation League, in attendance at the meeting, described a "heated discussion" between Lothrop and Moran. When Lothrop accused Moran of being anti-Semitic, "Mister Moran accused Mister Lothrop of being a Communist, and stated that the Community Church was Communistic."³²

Almost as if he had anticipated Lothrop's arguments, Moran produced, with great fanfare, a stack of "photostatic copies" of a letter from Father Coughlin. The letter, addressed to "My Dear Frank," outlined a benign project. Coughlin encouraged Moran to provide "local intellectual leadership" to "Social Justice Groups" in an effort "to teach and inform, rather than to organize a motley mass." Coughlin further urged Moran to "keep clear of all politics" and "advise" his followers that they "be temperate in their language and actions." Of course group members must refrain from "committing any act which might embarrass our cause or making any statements which might be misconstrued." The letter was dated simply December 1939. Most likely it was concocted by Moran and Coughlin in the wake of the New York

arrests and backdated to provide cover in case the Boston front was accused of harboring violent intentions.³³

Lothrop was caught off-guard by Moran's return salvo. Instead of being cowed, "Moran stated that the Christian Front from now on will fight harder than ever before." He invited all of those in attendance in Somerville to the next Christian Front meeting the following Monday at Hibernian Hall in Roxbury. Amid cheers, Moran flippantly "requested that the audience not be afraid to come as there would be no knives or bombs thrown."³⁴

Levy stayed on Moran's case. In February Levy contracted with Maurice Goldsmith, an agent for New York City's Jewish Peoples Council against Fascism and Anti-Semitism, to infiltrate Moran's meetings. Since 1936 Goldsmith had been attending Nazi and Fascist gatherings in New York, sometimes heckling and sometimes silently taking notes. In Boston, Goldsmith casually entered the February 12, 1940, Christian Front meeting at Hibernian Hall. He sat in the last row, where he noticed a young man "eyeing him suspiciously." After Moran finished his introductory remarks, the same young man "walked down the aisle with [a] slip of paper in his hand, which he gave to Moran."³⁵

"We have a pleasant announcement to make," Moran shouted. "We are being graced this evening by Mr. Maurice Goldsmith, a representative of the American Jewish Committee." Moran continued, "If you behave yourself, Mr. Goldsmith, you will be able to stay." One can imagine Moran's glee as he held forth. "I know why you are here anyway," he said, "as an undercover man for the AJC, the B'nai B'rith, and a whole lot of other Communist front organizations." Moran then spoke for roughly half an hour about Communists in government and about his trip to New York to visit Cassidy and the other Christian Front defendants. It was on this same trip that Moran met with the defense lawyer, Leo Healy, and with Father Curran, although there is no evidence that he brought this up at the meeting. Suddenly Moran "challenged Goldsmith or any Rabbi . . . to refute anything he had to say." Moran also insulted Goldsmith, saying he was "yellow" and "didn't have the guts" to work out in the open like the Christian Front.

Moran then asked if there were any undercover FBI agents in the audience and spent the next ten minutes berating the bureau. The tirade was eventually interrupted by a commotion in the back of the room. Abruptly "one woman stood up and shouted, 'Why don't we throw Goldsmith out?'" "No, no, no," Moran insisted, "we are not going to gang up on him or his kind. We

can take care of them single-handed if we have to.” At that point, a Christian Front member notified Moran that the crowd was now overflowing into the street and would need to “move to the larger hall on the next floor.” In his report, Goldsmith noted that “the attendance seemed to be about 700—many young people.”³⁶

Under Pressure

In the weeks after the New York arrests, nothing could stop Moran. He continued to attract large crowds, and no doubt the Lothrop and Goldsmith episodes only added to his mystique. It seemed that his faith was being rewarded, as the Boston front went from strength to strength. Certainly Moran’s ego was in no need of salvage. Here he was hatching plans with the former governor and besting Communists in public debate, if underhandedly. He even had what was supposedly a letter from Father Coughlin praising his “intellectual leadership.”

But by March, pressure was ratcheting up. For one thing, the FBI was finally taking a closer look at the Christian Front in Boston. On March 8, while federal prosecutors were putting together their jury in Brooklyn, Hoover wrote to Special Agent Peterson requesting “full information concerning Moran be obtained at once.” Of course, Moran could not have known this, and, as usual, Peterson was dilatory. When surveillance of the front restarted at its March 11 meeting, it was an operative of the American Jewish Committee in the room, not of the FBI. Moran did not know this, either. What he did know was that only 250 people attended the gathering, a reflection of how hard it was to recruit and organize in the midst of the sedition trial. The meeting was a pathetic exercise in self-defense. First, a Boston fronter denied that the Christian Front was an anti-Semitic organization. “We are not anti-Semitic but we are against atheist Jews and atheist Gentiles,” he protested. Then Moran took the stage and explained that “it was difficult for him to get good speakers to come to the meetings” and that many who had been previously booked had stayed away “for fear of spoiling their reputations.”

The press may not have been connecting the Boston front to the New York seditionists, but it was nonetheless getting harder to keep afloat an organization that shared its name with a clutch of alleged revolutionaries. Moran realized that he would have to step back for a time. To the astonishment of the relatively few assembled, he announced that he would be taking a break.

“I will be comparatively quiet until after the trial is over,” he said. “Then you will hear plenty from me.”³⁷

Moran did not need to witness the small turnout to decide that it was time for a hiatus: he had come to the meeting prepared to exit the public eye. That evening he distributed the first of his newsletters, which would be a major project while the front lay low. Single-spaced and typewritten on legal-sized paper, the pages contained all of Moran’s latest relevant thoughts, suggestions, and announcements. This was a new way of reaching the streets, in plain-talking style. The first issue wondered “why for years we have been told that the Communists could not be prosecuted, despite their open advocacy of sedition, unless they perpetrated an overt act . . . but in the Christian Front affair . . . the FBI says it is not necessary to commit an overt act and that seditious utterances are sufficient for conviction?” The newsletter ended benignly with the announcement of a “Christian Front Dance and Penny Sale” in two weeks.³⁸

According to the extant newsletters, only four meetings were held between March 25 and June 17, as compared to the twice-a-week meetings of 1939.³⁹ As Moran explained it, he was biding his time, but this was a feint. Like the rest of the public, he had no idea what would come next in the trial. In hindsight the verdict appears foreordained, but as far as Moran could tell in spring 1940, the New Yorkers faced the real possibility of decades in prison, and the name of the Christian Front would forever be sullied. Already Moran was losing members—and their cash. Like many Christian organizations, the front took collections at the end of meetings. Fewer meetings and reduced attendance meant financial strain; Moran was threatened with eviction from the Copley Square Hotel. And in late March the House Un-American Activities Committee announced that it would look into the Boston front. In fact, there was no investigation: the committee was being pushed to take the front seriously and mollified critics by promising an investigation that it never pursued. In real time, however, it must have seemed as though the Boston Christian Front was hurtling toward dissolution.⁴⁰

The conclusion of the trial on June 24 had the potential to change the course of things. Although the defendants were not technically acquitted, in the eyes of their supporters, the vindication was total and worthy of grand celebration. On July 1 Hibernian Hall was “packed to capacity . . . standing room only” for a meeting of the Christian Front. This time, “a large percentage seemed to be family groups,” with one source reporting that “the audience

was one of the most demonstrative ever witnessed—there was stamping of feet, applause, and side remarks approving of the speaker.” Moran blamed the arrests of the New York frontiers on the B’nai B’rith, crowing, “I guess we showed them down in New York.” He announced that new Christian Front groups would be started in Lowell and in Keene, New Hampshire. After months pent up, Moran was on offense, praising Hitler and castigating Jews.

“Hitler was the man,” Moran shouted. He rationalized Hitler’s actions on the grounds that someone in Germany had to “right the wrong” that was the Versailles Treaty. “All the stories about murders and attacks on Jews are lies and mere propaganda,” he asserted. Hitler’s “aggressiveness” was an understandable response to the depredations “of the international bankers and Communists in high places.” His confiscation of Jewish property was “justifiable,” due to the Jewish “minority control” of “sixty per cent of the entire wealth of the country.” “There had to be a reckoning—a restoration of balance.” Any refugees from Germany were said to be leaving “voluntarily.”

Moran was deluded, but he was not stupid. Demonstrating a supple political mind, he managed to commend Hitler while criticizing Nazism. “We disapprove of the moral platform of Hitler’s government,” Moran explained. “Our religion is based around the home while the Nazi platform is based around the state.” Moran was offended by the Nazi view of “amassing good blood through any means,” particularly that of promoting births outside of wedlock. “The fostering of illegitimacy is against our religion,” he noted.⁴¹

One strong meeting was not enough to restore the Boston Christian Front. Moran, however, seems to have had a talent for obtaining well-placed support just when he needed it: so many times when he was about to fade off into obscurity, an outstretched arm would save him at the last minute. First there was Father Coughlin, then Sybil Holmes, and now came Father Michael Ahern. Ahern was the last person one would expect to back the front. A polymath and “fundamentally a scientist,” Ahern chaired the department of chemistry and geology at Weston College, a Jesuit seminary on the outskirts of Boston. He dabbled in everything from fire-suppression systems to floriculture to seismology. But what made Ahern such a strange fit as a front supporter was his career promoting tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In 1931 “his friends of all faiths” gave him \$12,000 to install a world-class seismograph in Weston. The benefactors wanted to make sure Ahern received the money as a tribute to his “life combating religious prejudice in the United States.” Indeed, Father Ahern was a charter member of the National Conference of

Christians and Jews, the foremost pre–World War II Jewish-Christian dialogue group in the United States. And as a young priest, he joined the Harvard Seminar on Religious Intolerance, a group of rabbis and Protestant ministers who discussed the problem of prejudice. “Better understanding must eventually bring results among fair-minded people,” Ahern wrote in 1930.⁴²

Ahern was not only an ivory tower liberal. He took his message to the airwaves, becoming in 1929 New England’s own radio priest. His *Catholic Truth Radio Hour* aired on WNAC, which “dominated the dial” of Boston radio in the 1930s. By 1940 Ahern’s Sunday show was on the Yankee Network, a twenty-four-station powerhouse broadcasting him from Bangor, Maine, to Bridgeport, Connecticut. “Catholic Question Box,” a weekly column in the archdiocesan newspaper the *Boston Pilot*, gave Ahern even more exposure. Ahern’s commitment to tolerance was diametrically opposed to the views of Coughlin and Moran. Moran at one point “denounced Father Ahern for his activities in such movements as the National Conference of Christians and Jews.”⁴³

Despite all this, Father Ahern proved again Tillich’s foresight, becoming the next priest to give cover to the Christian Front. Ahern’s support came in a memorable radio broadcast on July 14, while the New York trial was still fresh on listeners’ minds. The thesis of the address, entitled “What is the Christian Front?” and lasting nearly an hour, was that the front was a mainstream organization doing good work for the faithful. Here was Catholic Action in practice: “Catholics applying their faith” with “confirmation, or approval” by the clergy. That confirmation was in fact coming from Ahern himself. Until this point, no priest or bishop had publicly lent his approval to the Boston Christian Front. There was every need for a Christian Front, Ahern argued, to face off against Spain’s Popular Front, which “purported to defend . . . the proletariat . . . against . . . ‘the forces of reaction.’” Sounding strangely like Father Curran and Leo Healy, Ahern classed the Christian Front alongside so many similarly situated groups: “the Protestant Front, the Atheistic Front, the Labor Front, the Jewish Front, and so forth.” To the extent that some of these fronts advocated against Christianity, a Christian Front was a necessary rejoinder. “The term Christian Front began to be used to designate those forces . . . which aimed to offset the anti-Christian ideologies,” Ahern explained.⁴⁴

Although Ahern had spent his life seeking a more tolerant world, his feelings about the plight of Spanish Catholics led him to promote a message

hardly different from Coughlin's, putting him at odds with his fellow liberals. For instance, Ahern received a serious lashing after speaking in favor of Franco during a 1938 event at Boston's Old South Meeting House, the venerable Congregational Church building famed in history as the gathering spot for the Boston Tea Party. For a Catholic priest to speak in such an environment was extraordinary, but when he began praising the Spanish Nationalists, he was met with "boos, hisses, and several near fistfights" before being "heckled from the floor." The experience jolted Ahern. He had been invited by activists sympathetic to the Popular Front, and when he asked them to recognize the real evils the Popular Front had committed, those activists proved combative and unruly. Was the Christian Front so much worse? By the time Ahern gave his radio speech, the Christian Front's supposedly violent seditionists had been spared earthly judgment, while the priest had seen with own eyes what Popular Front supporters were capable of.⁴⁵

So it was that in July 1940 Ahern could be at peace recommending the Christian Front to Catholics across New England. "Whatever activities certain units of the Christian Front may have undertaken were purely their responsibility, and not the responsibility of either the Catholic clergy, or the Catholic laity as a whole," he asserted. Then Ahern made a mystifying statement that seemed to jettison all of his previous work in Christian-Jewish relations. "Anti-Semitism, by the way, is no more a federal offense than is anti-Catholicism or anti-Protestantism," he said. Ahern's statement cannot be set aside as a bit of freelance legal hair-splitting; anti-Semitism was never mentioned in Cassidy's indictment, "nor did these attitudes come up in the trial," as Ahern himself admitted. His defense of the front need not have touched on the subject—why bring it up at all, except to sanction Catholic bigotry?⁴⁶

Ahern went on to defend the Christian Front on the grounds that, at trial, the group had not been considered a religious organization. With Catholic anti-Semitism discarded as a motive, anti-Communism came to the fore. "Their initial intention was perfectly good," Ahern wrote in a later reflection, "and within the law." During the radio address, he explained that "the issues of the Christian Front and anti-Semitism so prominent in the scare-headlines in January were already quashed weeks before the end of the trial in June. As a matter of fact, they were never issues in the case at all." Criticism of the speech left Ahern nonplussed. "In referring to the trial of the 14 men in Brooklyn for conspiracy against the United States, I pointed out that their membership in the Christian Front unit was not mentioned in their trial,"

Ahern said, joining Curran, Leo Healy, and the prosecution in demanding that the Christian Front itself was not on trial. The power of Curran's and Healy's arguments was such that even Ahern was moved. So convinced was he that he could not understand why anyone would disagree. "The bald assertion that I had, in that broadcast, defended a group that was un-Christian and un-American was, to say the least, a considerable shock," he wrote.⁴⁷

Moran took immediate advantage of Ahern's unexpected support. The day after the broadcast, July 15, 1940, Moran held a Christian Front meeting, where he told the audience "that a real champion had stepped forward." Previously, Moran said, "the Front has been unable to secure the approval of members of the clergy 'openly,' although many of them privately approved." Now "Father Ahern has rendered his approbation over the air." Of course, many priests had openly supported the front or the idea of a front, but they were not New Englanders. Ahern was the first local priest to throw his weight behind an active organization calling itself the Christian Front. His speech was also published in full on the front page of the July 20 *Boston Pilot*, lending the Boston Archdiocese's imprimatur to the broadcast.⁴⁸

Henry Levy was deeply worried. His contacts had penetrated the July 15 meeting and reported back on Moran's joyous embrace of Ahern. Levy wrote to Louis E. Kirstein, the chairman of the General Committee of the American Jewish Committee, that Moran "has already used the Ahern address as a blanket endorsement for his organization." Most concerning was that "Moran said Father Ahern's statement may be considered the attitude of the clergy with regard to the organization." While this was in some ways an exaggeration on Moran's part, it was also in keeping with the theory of Catholic Action: the approval of one priest in good standing with his bishop counted for the sanction of the whole Body of Christ. More concretely, the approval of the *Pilot* was a statement on behalf of the Boston Archdiocese. The secular press, meanwhile, was almost entirely silent. The *Boston Evening Transcript* was the only local newspaper to chastise "the Boston archdiocese" for its "hands-off policy regarding the local branch of the Christian Front."⁴⁹

Ahern's speech was a victory, but it was not the whole ballgame. Moran built on the endorsement by pursuing the archdiocese's formal recognition of the Christian Front. He knew that direct and public approval by a bishop was worth more than Ahern's words; a bishop's support would guarantee the Christian Front's standing as a religious organization extending the work of

the church. On July 17, three days after Father Ahern's speech, Moran reached out to William Cardinal O'Connell, the archbishop of Boston. "Your Eminence," Moran's letter began, "my sincere thanks for any effort you may have made in behalf of . . . those laymen, who, like myself, are fighting with outside organizations for the principles of Christianity." Moran went on to praise Ahern. Moran then asked the cardinal for "the honor of another interview," a puzzling request because the archdiocesan archives contain no record of Moran meeting with O'Connell previously. "Wisdom is necessary in the conduct of movements such as this," Moran closed, before signing off, "cordially and obediently yours."⁵⁰

Cordial obedience was not the characterization of Moran that O'Connell was receiving from his staff. "This Francis P. Moran, the Director of the Christian Front, is making a lot of threatening statements" diocesan chancellor Father Francis L. Phelan wrote to the cardinal's secretary in an undated note. Moran, in Phelan's opinion, was "a rather bold agitator." The chancellor "felt His Eminence would wish to know it," a signal for the secretary to forward the information directly to O'Connell. "N.A."—no answer—O'Connell scribbled at the top of Moran's letter, "file and save letter."⁵¹

Who knows if Moran paced the days away, awaiting a response that never came. The rejection must have been crushing, the latest dip in a year that had already featured its share of highs and lows for Moran and Boston's Christian Front. Nineteen-forty had begun with enormous promise, thanks to the successes of the previous fall. And even the initial bad press of the New York arrests wore off quickly. Soon enough, infiltrated and unsure about the trial, the Boston front entered its leanest period, only to experience the jubilation of the June verdict and Father Ahern's commendation. But Cardinal O'Connell's brush-off left the Christian Front at another impasse. The Boston unit had not yet recovered from the losses of the spring and remained spurned in polite society and the secular press. Ahern could not be counted on; he had received nothing but opprobrium for backing the front and, in any case, was a strange ideological bedfellow. The future was uncertain. Would another outstretched hand emerge from Boston's foggy clime?