

# Father Coughlin

Father Charles Coughlin was born on Oct. 25, 1891, in Hamilton, Ontario, where his father was sexton at St. Mary's Cathedral. Following in the family tradition, Coughlin studied in Toronto and served as a priest in Waco, Texas and Kalamazoo, Michigan before moving to Royal Oak in 1926. His assignment – establish a new parish, now known as The Shrine of the Little Flower.

Coughlin's reputation as an orator was well-established and radio station WJR began broadcasting his weekly sermons. He espoused compassionate capitalism – a popular sentiment as the nation fell into the Great Depression. Eventually the broadcasts were heard nationally by 30 million people.

Known as the "Fighting Priest," Coughlin became a political force, attacking "godless communism," the New Deal, labor unions and the international banking community. Increasingly his combative rhetoric drew critics, his audience shrank, and his superiors ended his radio career.

He remained pastor at the Shrine until 1966 and died near Detroit in 1979.



# Father Coughlin's Detroit

In 1926 Detroit was a boom town. The population had more than doubled over the last 15 years, standing at more than one million residents. In construction of residences, roads, sewers and commercial buildings, Detroit surpassed every other city in the nation.

Suburbs grew around the city's limits – 27 new communities were incorporated between 1920 and 1930. Royal Oak, a village of 6,000 residents straddling Woodward Avenue, became a city in 1921. It grew rapidly, more than tripling in population by the end of the decade.

1929 brought the beginning of the Great Depression. Within a few years, all elements of American society were affected. Detroit and its suburbs suffered in proportion to the tremendous prosperity enjoyed earlier.

In the 1940s, World War II reinvigorated the industrial sector, and Detroit became the “Arsenal of Democracy.” However, the city's social fabric was pulled taut, both economically and politically.



# Hero?

Father Charles Coughlin gave voice and hope to millions of ordinary Americans during the harshest years of the Great Depression. At the height of his popularity in the early 1930s, many eagerly anticipated his weekly radio broadcasts. The warmth and intimacy of Coughlin's voice carried through the airwaves. But what truly built his mass audience and transformed the Royal Oak radio priest into a serious national political force was his simple and consistent message.

Drawing upon the Gospels and the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, Coughlin emphasized the worth and dignity of the American workingman, particularly the right to decent wages in order to support his wife and children. All of this was threatened in the modern world, he insisted, by the twin forces of materialism: capitalism and communism. The Great Depression offered Coughlin the opportunity to broaden his reach throughout the nation, as newly unemployed workers were primed to hear his message of the evils of capitalism and the nation's monetary policy.

At first Coughlin welcomed the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his "New Deal." Eventually Coughlin broke with Roosevelt when it became clear that the administration had no intention of following his prescription for monetary reform, and then when he concluded that the administration had become cozy with the communists in the Congress of Industrial Organizations union. In so doing, as his supporters saw it, Father Coughlin showed that his honesty and his convictions mattered more than access to power.



# Villain?

Father Charles Coughlin was one of the most dangerous voices in American life during the 1930s. Like other demagogues of that decade, Coughlin used his God-given oratorical skills over the radio and at mass political rallies to manipulate the passions of his listeners and to stir the prejudices of his frenzied followers.

Coughlin was both a scam artist and a charlatan. His followers contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to charities that were fronts for his political ambitions. He was obsessed with monetary reform and the simple-minded idea that inflating the currency by switching to silver would lick the Great Depression and restore the country to prosperity.

Coughlin was obsessed with the notion of an international capitalist and communist conspiracy directed by Jews. By the late 1930s he had embraced European fascism, particularly of the Nazi variety. He used the pages of his weekly paper, *Social Justice*, to reprint the anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and he blamed Jews for provoking their own persecution by the Nazis in Germany.

By the end of the decade, Coughlin and his “Christian Front” had become rallying points for some of the most dangerous, thuggish and undemocratic forces in American society. It was with much relief, therefore, when after the attack on Pearl Harbor the U.S. government moved against the Royal Oak priest. The government would most likely have thrown Coughlin in prison for the duration of the war, had Archbishop Edward Mooney not stepped in and silenced his priest.

