

Charles Owen Rice: *Pittsburgh Labor Priest, 1936-1940*

DURING the depths of the Great Depression, Catholic right-wing extremists disrupted a Pittsburgh meeting of Catholic labor radicals by heckling and physically intimidating their co-religionists.¹ Both groups, Christian Front and Catholic Radical Alliance, recognized Roman Catholic priests as their leaders, Fathers Charles E. Coughlin and Charles Owen Rice respectively. This clash symbolized two poles of Catholic response to the breakdown of capitalism.

Just as Americans in general responded to the poverty and despair of the Depression by moving in numerous political directions, so did Catholics. Many followed the anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi tones of the "Radio Priest," Charles Coughlin, while some young zealots joined Catholic labor-oriented groups such as Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement, Rice's Catholic Radical Alliance of Pittsburgh, or the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. Most Catholic laymen, however, found reassurance in the political and economic reforms of Franklin D. Roosevelt and in the financial security offered by organized labor. Although the traditional labor movement—the AFL—had consistently operated with Church support, the emergence of the CIO presented Roman Catholic leaders with a new dilemma. How were they to treat this reform institution—more radical than the safe AFL, but committed to the betterment of the primarily Catholic industrial workers? Although eventually the Catholic leadership supported CIO organizational efforts, many bishops remained aloof from the controversy and parish priests frequently followed their own inclinations.² Often, conservative priests

¹ Charles Owen Rice to John Ryan, Feb. 10, 1938, Ryan Papers, Catholic University of America Archives.

² For an excellent overview of Catholic attitudes toward organized labor, see David O'Brien, "Catholicism and the Labor Movement in the 1930's" *Catholic Historical Review*, LII (1966), 323-349.

hindered CIO activities by labeling labor's organizing committees as agents of a communist conspiracy. The new federation met this challenge with its own clerical supporters.

Numerous priests, and sometimes hierarchy, actively engaged in labor agitation during the Depression. Although labor priests were a phenomenon among European social reformers earlier, and occasionally an American cleric had worked closely with the labor movement, during the Depression American Catholic clergy chose a far more extensive involvement in the labor movement than at any other time. In the last two years of the Depression, *The Labor Leader*, a New York City Catholic labor newspaper, cited more than twenty-five labor priests.

Labor-oriented priests responded to the Depression in numerous ways. Some spoke at union organizational rallies and meetings, often for the CIO. Others acted as union chaplains or even became full-time labor agitators. This support gave the CIO the aura of Catholic legitimacy in an era when employers used red-baiting as a primary anti-union tactic. The appearance of a priest, or occasionally a bishop, on a union platform often assured Catholic industrial workers that the union seeking support was not Communist dominated. Thus, labor priests attempted to counteract anti-Communist hostility to the CIO advanced by local priests in working-class, immigrant neighborhoods. Labor priests also functioned as delegates to union conventions, as educators operating labor education schools for workers, or as arbitrators and mediators during labor disputes.

Father John Monaghan, advisor to the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, formed a speakers' bureau of priests to co-ordinate clerical pro-labor propaganda. The bureau sponsored talks, not only at union gatherings but at meetings of Catholic lay organizations as well. Monaghan also established a national institute, the Social Action School, to educate labor priests in public speaking and labor economics, generally concentrating on social questions. Much of the faculty consisted of prominent clerics known either for their social work or as analysts of social reform. While the media reported only the statements of the well-known faculty, virtually all advocated reform of the capitalist system. Father John P. Boland, one of the outstanding faculty members of the Social Action School, advocated labor-management partnership agreements and industrial planning

to replace the competitive economic system which he characterized as "blind, stupid stagnation."³ Father Raymond A. McGowan, second in command of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and a prominent Catholic writer and social analyst, also taught at the school. McGowan believed in the establishment of a co-operative society based on shop committees, industrial councils, and national economic planning. He hoped a co-partnership of labor and management based on rational planning would simultaneously repulse government expansion and replace capitalism.⁴

James McNicholas, Archbishop of Cincinnati, also established clerical labor education programs for his archdiocese. He appointed specific priests to study labor questions and then to assist actively in the labor movement.⁵ In Chicago, Monsignor Reynold Hildebrand arranged classes for priests from industrial districts of the city. After attending lectures and taking part in seminars directed by labor leaders, the priests engaged in community organizing, particularly aiding the labor movement.⁶

Although the Catholic clergy established schools for their own enlightenment in trade union affairs, this did not remain their emphasis in labor-oriented education. Priests also taught at schools designed for future labor leaders among the working class. Individual dioceses and independent Catholic lay groups, such as the Catholic Worker Movement or the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, sponsored labor schools of this kind. Occasionally, a lay group working jointly with the local diocese operated a labor school. Those of Detroit, the most successful Catholic labor schools, functioned this way. No matter how the schools were administered, the faculties consisted primarily of clerics. Course material centered on parliamentary procedure, Catholic industrial ethics and labor encyclicals, labor economics, and sometimes labor history. One analyst of social Catholicism estimated that more than five thousand attended Cath-

³ *Labor Leader*, Oct. 17, 1938, 3.

⁴ David O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform, The New Deal Years* (New York, 1968), 101.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶ Barbara Warne Newell, *Chicago and the Labor Movement: Metropolitan Unions in the 1930's* (Urbana, 1961), 243-245.

olic labor schools yearly. Since the students were often minor union officials, there was strong potential for Catholic influence.⁷

Given these educational activities of concerned Catholic clergy, it is not surprising that numerous priests became known for their close alliance with organized labor. Father John P. Boland, on the faculty of the Social Action School, held honorary membership in more than one hundred labor unions.⁸ Charles A. Maxwell, spiritual advisor to a local Steel Workers Organizing Committee, was the first honorary member of the Steel Workers Union. He had been appointed to his chaplaincy by the Bishop of Buffalo, New York, John A. Duffey, also a strong labor supporter.⁹ Father William J. Kelley, educational director of the AFL in Buffalo, directed the education program of 40,000 members from 130 local unions.¹⁰ Auxiliary Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago enthusiastically supported organized labor, especially the CIO. Under his guidance, a pro-union newspaper, *Catholic Labor*, began publishing, and the Catholic Youth Organization aided union organizational attempts. Sheil himself helped labor by appearing at union rallies and endorsing union demands. The CIO believed that Sheil's role in the Newspaper Guild Strike of 1937 countered anti-CIO conservative Catholic support.¹¹ On the national level, Archbishop Lucey of San Antonio, Texas, consistently supported the CIO. The federation published and widely circulated pamphlets quoting his statements. Typically, in a letter of October 31, 1938, to John Brophy, executive director of the CIO, Lucey stated that "in the Province of God a bitter day has dawned on the teaming masses of people. By enormous efforts the Committee for Industrial Organization is lifting labor from its lethargy."¹²

Because so many priests had pro-labor associations, Democratic administrations, both on the state and federal level, appointed numerous clerics to government positions involving organized labor. Father Boland, New York State mediator, was also chairman of

⁷ Edward Marciniak, "Catholics and Labor-Management Relations," in Leo Ward, ed., *The American Apostolate* (Westminster, Md., 1952), 19.

⁸ *Labor Leader*, Nov. 27, 1938, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 1939, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Jan. 15, 1939, 5.

¹¹ Newell, 244-245.

¹² Quoted in a speech by Joseph M. Conlon of the ACTU, *Labor Leader*, Oct. 31, 1938, 1.

the Buffalo Regional Labor Board until June, 1937. Father Francis J. Haas, author of numerous pamphlets, articles, and books favorable to organized labor, served on the Labor Advisory Board of the NRA. President Roosevelt appointed him to the National Labor Board in 1933, where Haas chaired the majority of cases before the NLB from the time of his appointment until June, 1934. The President described his services as "invaluable" in a personal tribute to the priest in 1935. At that time the administration assigned him to the three-man Labor Policies Board of the WPA.¹³ Haas, as a major clerical writer on social questions and as a New Deal official, gave his pronouncements on labor a two-fold tone of authority. Writing in the *Catholic Worker*, Haas argued that the worker had a duty to himself and to his fellowmen to join a union.¹⁴ In addition, Fathers William A. Bolger and John W. McGuire were members of the Chicago regional labor board. Father Frederick Seidenberg was vice-chairman of the Detroit regional labor board, and Father Louis Hershon was vice-president of the Cleveland regional board and chairman of the Toledo regional board.¹⁵ Father James Cox, a colorful priest of Pittsburgh, was appointed to the Pennsylvania State Commission for the Unemployed by Governor Gifford Pinchot, and to the state recovery board of the NRA by President Roosevelt.¹⁶ Monsignor John A. Ryan, the major American Catholic social thinker of the twentieth century, held numerous labor positions both in private and public fields. He was vice-president of the National Unemployment League, vice-president of the American Association for Labor Legislation, member of many pro-strike citizens committees, and vice-president of the American Association for Social Security. In addition he held several Federal Government advisory positions relative to labor.

Pittsburgh had a tradition of clerical labor activity. Even in the 1920's when Catholic social activism barely existed, Pittsburgh could claim one of the few labor priests of the decade. Father James Cox, known as the "Pastor of the Poor," helped labor organizational attempts and devoted time to working-class causes. The emergence

¹³ Paul Stroh, "The Catholic Clergy and American Labor Disputes" (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University, 1939), 136, 146, 150.

¹⁴ *Catholic Worker*, September, 1933, 6.

¹⁵ Stroh, 142, 146.

¹⁶ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Mar. 20, 1951, 9.

of the Depression, and the inability of the Federal Government to deal with poverty outraged the concerned priest. In 1932, he organized 15,000 people into a "hunger march" on Washington.¹⁷ Cox then enrolled 50,000 unemployed workers in an organization and threatened to form a "Jobless Party" if neither the Democrats nor Republicans brought relief to the poor.¹⁸ The optimism following the nomination and election of Roosevelt, however, ended Cox's threat.¹⁹ After the demise of the Jobless Party idea, Cox appeared once more on the national political scene. He led a group to Washington in support of the Townsend Plan, met with the President, but received no commitment.²⁰ Cox then dropped out of the national spectrum.

Although his political pronouncements, and meandering in party allegiance, made local news, his main energies centered around a free soup kitchen sponsored by his church. Cox is reputed to have served more than two million free meals, distributed half a million baskets of food, and provided medical care for thousands.²¹ Because of his preoccupation with feeding the unemployed, he spent virtually no time aiding trade union activities. In fact, while other Catholic lay groups, and individual clerics, gave considerable aid to the union in the Pittsburgh Heinz Corporation strike of 1937, Cox supported management. He had consistently accepted Heinz products which the corporation donated to his soup kitchen.²² Cox apparently felt that such a generous firm would do little wrong. His attitude toward the Heinz strike revealed his underlying ambivalence toward organized labor. Although he labored for the poor and he considered himself a "union man," Cox continually denounced labor in the 1930's for being dictatorial and corrupt.²³ Obviously, his status as a labor

¹⁷ The New York City newspapers, *The Evening Post*, *Times*, *Herald Tribune*, *Sun*, and *World Telegram* gave thorough coverage to the details of the march and its aftermath from Jan. 7 to Jan. 17, 1932.

¹⁸ Cox was involved with several coalition attempts. He joined with "Coin" Harvey of Arkansas, held a convention of the Liberty-Jobless Party, but soon the alliance split apart. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Mar. 20, 1951, 9.

¹⁹ Aaron Abell, *American Catholicism and Social Action* (Notre Dame, 1963), 235; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Mar. 20, 1951, 1, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Jan. 14, 1936, clipping in Cox papers.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 20, 1951, 9.

²² *Pittsburgh Sun-Times*, Mar. 20, 1951, 9.

²³ Oral history interview with Rice, Apr. 5, 1958, 1, 9, Rice Papers, Pennsylvania State University Archives.

priest declined measurably. Although Cox received national attention, in labor circles he was completely eclipsed by Father Charles Owen Rice, a young, dynamic priest. Rice, through dedicated and innovative work, became the major labor priest of Pittsburgh during the Depression years. In fact, Rice became so close to the CIO leadership that he was known as the "Chaplain of the CIO."

Rice was born in New York City. After his mother died he went to Ireland and lived among relatives for seven years of his boyhood. At the age of eleven he returned to the United States and joined his father in Pittsburgh. Rice later attended Duquesne University and St. Vincent's Seminary, where he was ordained in 1934.²⁴ He seemed destined to labor activism. His schoolmaster uncles with whom he had lived in Ireland were concerned with rebellion, politics, and religion. Years later Rice said of his family, "we were definitely hung up on the Irish struggle for justice."²⁵ Like many of the Irish radicals in America, British oppression of the Catholics in Ireland provided him with much of his initial hostility to the *status quo*. The Irish revolutionary movement gave Rice not only an outlook which reached beyond conventional assumptions of society, but an empathy with the exploited. To be a nationalist in twentieth-century Ireland was to be a democrat, economic reformer, revolutionist, and Roman Catholic.

"I am a radical, a Catholic radical," Rice often pointed out. "I believe that the present social and economic system is a mess and should be changed from top to bottom."²⁶ He branded Catholic "friends of the present system," as "traitors to Christ."²⁷ Rice did not outline any truly radical ends for society other than his commitment to the socioeconomic visions of the major papal social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*; rather, he stressed his allegiance to labor unionism, particularly the emerging CIO. Summarizing Catholic doctrine on labor unions, Rice said in 1938, "Labor unions are good things for the workmen. Those who interfere with the workers right to organize, in whatever fashion, are

²⁴ Oral history interview with Rice, Feb. 6, 1958, *ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ "Remarks by Rice on Peoples Congress for Peace and Democracy," Nov. 26-28, 1937 *ibid.*

²⁷ Pamphlet, Catholic University Archives, CIO central office papers, 1937-1941.

doing wrong and commit grave sin.”²⁸ Like other labor priests, he argued that the “worker has a right to join a union, moreover, he has a Duty to do so.”²⁹ Rice based his unionism on religious commitment. “As a Catholic priest I am profoundly interested in social and economic reform, especially . . . labor unions. I am so interested because of my Christianity. Christ’s concern for the poor and the exploited is clear command to all His followers to be concerned for them.”³⁰ “Unionism,” he declared, “is the Christian thing.”³¹

Rice favored the CIO, but not uncritically. “I find fault with the CIO chiefly because it does not go far enough. . . . But it is young and in time will develop an adequate social philosophy.”³² Likewise, Rice’s close associate in the Catholic Radical Alliance, another Pittsburgh priest, Carl P. Hensler, hoped capitalism would be moderated through left-wing unionism. “The union especially cannot remain a mere fighting machine,” he stated at a National Catholic Social Action Conference, “its role must be enlarged from bargaining over wages and hours to sharing in the conduct of the whole industry.”³³

In order to achieve his reform goals, in 1936, Rice, assisted by Hensler and Monsignor George Barry O’Toole, led other priests and laymen in the formation of the Catholic Radical Alliance.³⁴ The organization began as an outgrowth of the Catholic Worker Movement which Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded in 1933. Maurin, the ideologist of the Movement, advocated complete change in the social, economic, and political conditions of the country. He hoped to see agrarian-oriented, autonomous communal societies established in which members would produce, not for capitalist gain, but for their love of man and God. The emulation of his utopia would result in a world based on love, peace, and community, rather than on competition, war, and individualism. To create a climate of opinion necessary for such a direction, as well as to deal with the

²⁸ Rice, “Statement Concerning Aluminum Workers of America,” Mar. 26, 1938, Rice Papers.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Biographical sketch of Rice by Hugh M. Poe in Rice Papers.

³² *Labor Leader*, Sept. 12, 1938, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, May 9, 1938, 3.

³⁴ Oral history interview with Rice, Feb. 6, 1958, 2-3, Rice Papers.

needs of depression-ridden America, he advocated the establishment of schools, discussion groups, and newspapers. He also urged his followers to establish "houses of hospitality," which would house and feed the poor, provide a communal life for those in the city, act as centers of Catholic radical activism, and channel people to communal farms.³⁵

Dorothy Day, the institutional leader of the Movement, supervised the establishment of houses of hospitality in New York City, several collective farms, and the Movement's newspaper, the *Catholic Worker*. Where tactical differences arose between Day and Maurin, Day prevailed. At variance with Maurin's ideas, Day and the Movement supported organized labor, especially the CIO, and the New Deal. Soon after Day began her work as a Catholic activist, Catholic worker units sprang up all over the country. The New York group considered itself as but one among equals, and it gave only the most subtle direction to its affiliates. Thus, each unit responded to the needs of its area without following a Catholic Worker line. Some groups spun off completely, forming separate organizations. The Catholic Radical Alliance reflected this galloping autonomy of the Catholic Worker Movement.³⁶ For a time Rice considered the Alliance a unit of the Catholic Worker Movement. He often forwarded progress reports to the Movement's outlet, the *Catholic Worker*, pointing out that the "Pittsburgh branch has been prospering."³⁷ But the Alliance never had the radical goals of Maurin. Although it was influenced by the Catholic Worker Movement and carried out much of its program, especially the establishment of a successful house of hospitality, during the Depression the Alliance supported industrial unionism as its main goal. In later years, Rice, in describing the Alliance, stated that, "We stood for unions, we stood for freedom of workers to join associations, we called for modification of the social and economic system and we were very strongly pro-peace."³⁸ By modification of the socioeconomic system, Rice meant commitment to the social encyclicals which were far less radical than Maurin's communalism.

³⁵ Neil Betten, "Catholicism and the Industrial Worker during the Great Depression" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1968), 126-168.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *The Catholic Worker*, Feb. 6, 1938, 6.

³⁸ Oral history interview with Rice, Feb. 6, 1958, 3 Rice Papers.

The Alliance spent most of its time aiding the labor movement. In 1938 Hensler and Rice taught at a Steel Workers Organizing Committee summer school.³⁹ The two labor priests also organized their own labor classes and discussion groups, but their main contribution to the labor movement during the 1930's was their defense of the CIO when anti-union forces accused it of being Communist controlled.

Attacks upon the CIO came from all quarters. When the papal publication *Osservatore Romano* published an interview with Martin Carmody, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, in which he accused the CIO of being "completely directed by Communist forces," Rice immediately sprang to the federation's defense. He replied that the "statement is simply untrue. . . . By your ill-advised statement and your wild charges, you do no service to our order, which numbers among its members many high officials of the CIO."⁴⁰ Likewise, Rice responded to Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen's slurs against organized labor. "Monsignor Sheen was definitely unfair to labor [in inferring that] labor is responsible . . . for the violence that has characterized American industrial disputes." Rice offered personally to show Sheen that "fight after fight . . . was . . . provoked by organized capitalist thuggery." In this statement Rice also defended the CIO's use of the sit-down strike.⁴¹ In a speech republished in the trade union press, including the *Textile Worker*, where it appeared on the front page, Rice lauded the CIO as a "good thing, it is a healthy, growing movement." He added that, "it is not Godless, Communistic, or un-American. It has its roots in Christianity and Americanism." He denied that the CIO had any Communists in positions of importance. "I have not seen one decent piece of evidence that would tie a front rank CIO leader to the Communist Party."⁴² When conservative AFL official John P. Frey implied before the House Un-American Activities Committee that CIO director John Brophy was a Communist, both Rice and Hensler testified that he was a devout Catholic and Frey backed down.⁴³

³⁹ *Labor Leader* Aug. 1, 1938, 1.

⁴⁰ "Statement of Rice Charges in *Osservatore Romano*," Rice Papers.

⁴¹ Rice Lenten Course at St. Augustine Church and response to Mar. 5, 1938, talk by Fulton J. Sheen, Rice Papers.

⁴² *The Textile Worker*, Aug., 1937, clipping, *ibid.*

⁴³ *Labor Leader*, Aug. 22, 1938, 1.

Brophy expressed his appreciation to Rice "for the fine support and cooperation you gave me."⁴⁴

Rice and his Alliance took part in numerous CIO organizational drives during the 1930's, although the Steelworkers of Western Pennsylvania received the most attention. When the Alliance led by Rice went to Youngstown, Ohio, during the Little Steel Strike, they faced problems with local Catholic clergy. "We were unfavorably received," Rice related later, "by the priests of the community."⁴⁵ In many major cities, *e.g.*, Philadelphia, Boston, and even in Pittsburgh, Rice opposed anti-union clerics. In such instances, Rice propagandized his view of Roman Catholic responsibilities in labor actions, and he defended the CIO. On the other hand, he often found clerical supporters, as in Johnstown and Wheeling, where pro-union priests made Rice's job easier.⁴⁶

Rice dramatically portrayed his approval of the CIO organizational drives by personally engaging in strike activities, a highly unusual act for a Catholic priest at that time. He picketed during the Pittsburgh Heinz corporation strike of 1937.⁴⁷ During steel industry confrontations he often spoke to overflow crowds at immigrant meeting houses and had his fellow supporters distribute Catholic labor literature.⁴⁸ In the late 1930's, Rice gave aid to the Aluminum Workers Union, Paper Workers, Hotel Restaurant Workers, and the American Newspaper Guild, Auto Workers, United Mine Workers, Teamsters, Laundry Workers, Amalgamated Meat Cutters, Fraternal Order of Police, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Bakery Workers, Retail Clerks, Warehouse Men and Mechanics, and Transport Workers Union. He worked with hospital, river, and communications workers, as well as teachers, to improve hours, wages, and working conditions through labor organization.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ John Brophy to Rice, Aug. 24, 1938, Rice Papers.

⁴⁵ Oral history interview with Rice, Feb. 6, 1958, 3, *ibid.*; author's interview with Rice, Nov. 5, 1969.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Catholic Worker*, May, 1937, 7; also, June, 1937, 1.

⁴⁸ Dorothy Day, *House of Hospitality* (New York, 1932), 263.

⁴⁹ Letter from Rice to author, Nov. 26, 1969; oral history interview with Rice, Apr. 5, 1958, 3; clipping, "Aluminum Workers Union Approved by Noted Priest"; "Statement concerning Aluminum Workers of America," Mar. 26, 1938; news clipping from *The Ledger*, October, 1938, Rice Papers.

Rice attempted to help the CIO in its conflict with Mayor Frank Hague of Jersey City. Victor Pasche, secretary of the Newspaper Guild, in a letter requesting Rice's support, described Hague as "virtual absolute ruler of Hudson county . . . who has consistently tried to identify his anti-labor activities as good Catholicism, and uses his position as self-appointed defender of the Church to have his police beat up and drive out peaceful organizers."⁵⁰ Rice immediately joined the New Jersey Civil Liberties Union, the vanguard in the fight against Boss Hague, and he established a subcommittee of the Civil Liberties group in Pittsburgh. Most important, he issued statements to counteract Hague's misuse of Catholicism. "Understanding that Mayor Hague professes Christianity," Rice rhetorically asked, "I wonder how it is that he can reconcile the teachings of Christ with his brutal tactics." Rice, in condemning Hague's practices, argued that "it is but a hollow sham to profess Christ and at the same time to war against His justice and charity."⁵¹ The CIO and the Civil Liberties Union widely circulated these statements in Jersey City. Hague, however, successfully blocked Rice's intention of personally confronting the Mayor's forces in Jersey City, itself. Hague used his influence with Archbishop Walsh who made it clear that he did not want Rice engaging in politics within his diocese.⁵²

Rice's Catholic Radical Alliance expanded beyond organized labor activities. Like its parent New York Catholic Worker Movement, it established a house of hospitality, a refuge for the poor that both housed and fed the unemployed. The Pittsburgh St. Joseph House, once an orphanage, outgrew similar undertakings within the Catholic Worker Movement. The three-story building, staffed by thirty people, housed the Alliance offices and classrooms for worker education. From there the Alliance sponsored a radio program, fed more than eight hundred daily, slept three hundred nightly, and operated a clinic.⁵³ At times the numbers sheltered reached nearly eight hundred, the men sleeping on floors and eating the inadequate amount of food that the Alliance could provide for them. The organi-

⁵⁰ Victor Pasche to Rice, Dec. 2, 1937, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Statement by Rice included with letter to Morris L. Ernst, Dec. 14, 1937, *ibid.*

⁵² Author's interview with Rice, Nov. 5, 1969.

⁵³ *Catholic Worker*, April, 1938, 6.

zation established a farming commune in the spring of 1938—"a weird effort," Rice later called it.⁵⁴ The farm, located in Indiana County, Pennsylvania, depended primarily on one man, Frank Hensler, a brother of Rice's collaborator. It dissolved shortly after World War II because, as Rice explained, "they couldn't get other people interested and because an investment in chickens turned out badly."⁵⁵ The Alliance also sponsored a peace group reflecting the Catholic Worker Movement's pacifist orientation. Rice, however, influenced by the famous German exile priest, the Rev. H. A. Reinhold, accepted the necessity of armed conflict in order to stop the advance of Nazi Germany.⁵⁶

In 1938 Rice established a unit of a new national Catholic labor organization, the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU), within the Alliance. Like the Alliance, the ACTU grew out of the Catholic Worker Movement, but quickly severed its connection with the parent organization. The ACTU followed an adamant anti-Communist course of action at variance with the more moderate Catholic Worker Movement. The Alliance had also taken a stronger anti-Communist position than the Catholic Worker Movement. Although the Alliance refused to co-operate with Communists, in the 1930's it rejected red-baiting, a standard tactic of the ACTU.⁵⁷ Eventually, the Alliance's ties to the Catholic Worker Movement withered away and Rice affiliated his group with the national ACTU.⁵⁸ The implications of the ACTU-Alliance merger would not be felt until the late 1940's and 1950's, a period beyond the purview of this study. The Alliance, known then as the Pittsburgh ACTU, concentrated on fighting Communist influence in labor. It thus lost much of its Catholic Worker orientation. The attempt to force Communist unionists out of the movement, however, played little part in the Depression goals of the Alliance. During the 1930's the Alliance concentrated on sublimating the supposed Communist threat in order to help the CIO to attract cautious Catholic workers.

⁵⁴ Charles Owen Rice, "Pittsburgh Houses of Hospitality," *Information* (clipping), Rice Papers.

⁵⁵ Letter from Rice to author, Nov. 26, 1969.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Debate between Rice and Hathaway, Oct. 15, 1938; statement issued by Rice concerning Peoples Congress for Peace and Democracy, Nov. 26, 1937, Rice Papers.

⁵⁸ Author's interview with Rice, Nov. 5, 1969.

In keeping with his support of industrial unionism, Rice considered the Wagner Act as a logical defense for the worker. Although he favored most of the New Deal objectives, he occasionally came into conflict with the reformers from Washington. Ironically, this led to close ties between Rice and the Roosevelt Administration. In 1938 Rice led Pittsburgh opposition to urban renewal in a lower-middle-class section of the city. He felt that the destruction of a stable community of small homeowners and the imposition of a public apartment house complex in an already crowded neighborhood was unfair, immoral, and not in the interests of stable family life.⁵⁹ Thus, Rice formed a tenant's association and brought the matter to court. On the average, local residents received \$1,000 more for their homes than the original figure offered by the government.⁶⁰ In later years Rice became chairman of Pittsburgh's Fair Rent Committee. This community action group processed thousands of complaints against the Public Housing Authority and other government agencies during the boom-town atmosphere of wartime Pittsburgh. Rice eventually held numerous government positions in housing, went to New York and set up the Brooklyn Rent Control System, and became OPA Rent Control Director for Western Pennsylvania.⁶¹

Although Rice was never as radical as the name of his organization implied, he worked closely with the labor movement during the Great Depression, becoming one of the most active labor priests of the decade. While many other clerics carried on similar activities, the industrial activity of the Pittsburgh area thrust Rice into the focus of national attention. When Catholic lay organizations did not emerge in response to the needs of the depression-ridden city, Rice and his band of priests met the challenge. After naming the organization Catholic Radical Alliance, thus achieving immediate notice, Rice proceeded to carry out genuine, serious, and, for a priest, innovative social action activities. Thus, when contrasted with the conservative image of the Church, and especially when compared with outspoken anti-union clerics, Rice seemed more radical than he was.

⁵⁹ Statement by Rice at meeting of Soho and Gazzan Home, Feb. 1, 1939, Rice Papers.

⁶⁰ "Owners and Tenants League protesting Pittsburgh Housing Authority Action," *ibid.*

⁶¹ Poe, biographical sketch, *ibid.*

Rice was a reformer in keeping with the sentiments of the time; he was not a revolutionary. Once given notoriety as a radical labor priest, a position he backed with solid labor activities, the CIO continually called upon his support to counter conservative ethnic suspicions of the new labor federation. Rice, the logical defender of the CIO in western Pennsylvania, thwarted attacks of hostile clerics who accused the CIO of being Communists. Thus, during the 1930's Rice provided a service to the worker and especially the labor movement. Although in the late 1940's and early 1950's he supported the removal of Communists from positions of influence within organized labor, during the 1930's his efforts were more solely directed to creating an effective, popular, and united CIO.

Rice personified the labor priest of the 1930's—young, committed to change, and willing to agitate in the streets for the worker and the labor movement. Like other labor priests, he supported the reforms of the New Deal and, like a select few, was appointed to office by Roosevelt. As a government administrator, and as unofficial chaplain of the CIO, he had access to national figures; yet Rice did not lose sight of the individual worker. Although Rice's ideas continued to evolve with time, during the 1930's he, and labor priests like him, constituted the practical left within social Catholicism.⁶²

Florida State University

NEIL BETTEN

⁶² The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Charles O. Rice is now pastor of the Holy Rosary Church in Pittsburgh. Although Father Rice has continued his interest in organized labor, he is also a civil rights and peace movement activist.