

Fulton Sheen, Catholic Champion

by Thomas Reeves

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When American history textbooks mention Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen at all, it is briefly and in connection with the allegedly “feel good” Christianity of the 1950s. To some Americans, Sheen was merely a glib, superficial television performer and pop writer who blossomed briefly on the national scene and rapidly disappeared.

Many orthodox Catholics have a clearer understanding of Sheen, for more than a dozen of his books remain in print, several anthologies of his writings are for sale, and his television shows and tapes continue to be popular. The Eternal Word Television Network regularly features Sheen videotapes. Moreover, an effort is underway, formally inaugurated by the late Cardinal O'Connor of New York, to have the Archbishop canonized.

In preparing *America's Bishop: The Life and Times of Fulton J. Sheen* (Encounter Books, 2001) I discovered a brilliant, charismatic, and holy man who has been underestimated by historians, largely overlooked by the contemporary mass media, and forgotten by too many Catholics. Indeed, I came to the conclusion that Fulton J. Sheen was the most important Catholic of twentieth century America.

Sheen was born in tiny El Paso, Illinois, in the north central part of the state, in 1895. His father was a modestly prosperous farmer in the Peoria region, his mother a hard-working and popular farm wife and mother of four boys. The Sheen children were gifted with high intelligence (one, Tom, had a photographic memory), trained to work hard (for most of

his life Fulton would work a nineteen hour day, seven days a week), and encouraged to advance themselves through education. The parents also stressed the importance of their Catholic faith. The Sheen boys went to parochial schools, and the family attended church regularly and said the Rosary together nightly.

Fulton excelled in his school work from the start, and was an extremely popular youngster. Rather short (five foot seven) and slim, he was unable to compete effectively in athletics and so poured his energy into becoming a skilled collegiate debater. His beautiful speaking voice, penetrating eyes (inherited from his mother), pleasing personality, and outstanding academic preparation proved effective in competitions.

From Fulton's earliest years, there seemed to be a consensus of opinion in the family that he would become a priest. After graduating from St. Viator College in Bourbonnais, Illinois, he went to seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. From there he went to the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. to earn a doctorate in philosophy. After ordination in 1919 and receiving two degrees from CUA in 1920, Sheen went to the prestigious Louvain University in Belgium. Here he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy with the highest distinction and was invited to try for a "super doctorate," the *agregé en Philosophie*. He was the first American ever to receive such an offer. Sheen earned the honor in 1925, again passing with the highest distinction. He transformed his dissertation into a prize-winning book and won the respect and admiration of G. K. Chesterton, among others.

After a brief and successful stint in a slum church in Peoria (a test given by his bishop to see if he would be obedient), Sheen became an instructor at Catholic University. He was to remain on the CUA faculty, teaching philosophy and theology, from 1926 until 1950.

While proving to be a popular professor, Sheen's interests were primarily off-campus. After writing two scholarly books, he began publishing a lengthy list of more or less popular books and articles that would earn him honors and praise throughout the country. In 1928, he went on the "Catholic Hour," a nationally broadcast radio program. He quickly became the program's most popular preacher and for more than two decades was asked to preach during Lent and at Holy Days. Vast quantities of letters and financial donations poured in on "Catholic Hour" officials whenever Sheen spoke.

Sheen was soon in demand throughout the country and Western Europe as a preacher, retreat leader, and teacher. He preached annually at St. Patrick's Cathedral, where he packed the huge church and received much attention in the press.

Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York, one of the most powerful figures in the Roman Catholic Church, took Sheen under his wing after World War II, and in 1948 invited him to join a world-wide tour and assume the bulk of the journey's preaching duties. The two men greatly appreciated each other's talents (the Cardinal was a superb administrator and fund-raiser), and in 1950 Spellman had Sheen named to head the American branch of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, the Church's principal source of missionary funds. The appointment came with a miter, and in 1951, Sheen was consecrated in Rome. Sheen flung himself into his new duties, revealing his great skill as a fund-raiser. He continued to produce books, articles, and newspaper columns at an astonishing rate, and accepted invitations to preach throughout the country and across the world. Sheen's personal success at winning converts—the list included writer Clare Boothe Luce, industrialist Henry Ford II, and ex-Communist Louis Budenz—attracted national attention. Unmentioned in the press were the thousands of average Americans who came into the Church because of Sheen's efforts.

When, in 1951, the Archdiocese of New York decided to enter

the world of television, Sheen was a natural choice to appear on screen. The initial half-hour lectures were broadcast on the tiny Dumont Network, opposite big budget programs by comedian Milton Berle, "Mr. Television," and singer-actor Frank Sinatra. No one gave Sheen a chance to compete effectively. Soon, however, Sheen took the country by storm, winning an Emmy, appearing on the cover of Time magazine, and entering the "most admired" list of Americans. In its second year, "Life Is Worth Living" moved to the ABC Network and had a sponsor, the Admiral Corporation.

Sheen's talks, delivered in the full regalia of a bishop, were masterful. He worked on each presentation for 35 hours, delivering it in Italian and French to clarify his thoughts before going on television. He at no time used notes or cue cards, and always ended on time. The set was a study with a desk, a few chairs, and some books; the only prop was a blackboard. A four-foot statue of Madonna and Child on a pedestal was clearly visible. Sheen's humor, charm, intelligence, and considerable acting skill radiated throughout the "Life Is Worth Living" series, captivating millions eager to hear Christian (only indirectly Catholic) answers to life's common problems.

Some of Sheen's talks and writings dealt with Communism, which the Bishop, a student of Marxism and a personal friend of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, thought a dire threat to the nation and the world. But at no time did Sheen appear with or praise Senator Joe McCarthy (he had little use for politicians of any stripe) or directly support the Second Red Scare, which swept through the country during the early 1950s.

Sheen was also a student of Freud, and was consistently critical of Freudian psychology. Sheen's best-selling book, *Peace Of Soul*, presented his views on the subject forcefully. At about the same time, the bishop wrote a powerful book on the Virgin Mary, *The World's First Love*, followed a few years later by an equally impressive *Life of*

Christ.

For all of his concerns about worldly issues, Sheen was above all a supernaturalist, who fervently believed that God is love, that miracles happen, and that the Catholic Church best taught the divinely revealed truths about life and death. As he put it in *Peace Of Soul*, “nothing *really* matters except the salvation of a soul.”

Still, Sheen was not a plaster saint. Vanity was a constant problem for him, and he knew it. As both priest and bishop, Sheen lived and dressed well and enjoyed the publicity he received in the media and the applause of adoring crowds. Perhaps more serious was an offense that was not discovered until twenty years after his death: while a young teacher at Catholic University, in order to expedite his academic career, he invented a second doctorate for himself.

Sheen could also be difficult at times when his authority was challenged. In the early 1950s, he and Cardinal Spellman, a very proud man, engaged in a bitter feud largely over the dispersal of Society funds. The struggle led to a private audience before Pius XII, who sided with Sheen. In a rage, Spellman terminated Sheen’s television series, made him a local outcast, and drove him from the Archdiocese. In 1966, Sheen became the Bishop of Rochester.

Bishop Sheen had been an active participant in the Vatican II sessions in Rome and thoroughly endorsed the reforms that followed. He tried to make his diocese the bridge between the old and new Catholicism, enacting sweeping reforms and making headlines in the process. Without administrative skills, Sheen alienated many in Rochester, and in 1969 he resigned and returned to New York.

During the last decade of his life, while battling serious heart disease, Sheen continued at a breathtaking pace to travel, speak, and write. During the course of his more than

50 year career in the Church, he wrote 66 books and countless articles. No other Catholic figure of the century could match his literary productivity. (Book royalties and television fees went almost exclusively to the Society. Sheen estimated that he gave \$10 million of his own money to the organization he headed.)

In October, 1979 Sheen met John Paul II in the sanctuary of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Thunderous applause greeted their embrace. The Pope privately told the 84-year-old Archbishop that he had been a loyal son of the Church. Nothing could have been more pleasing for Fulton Sheen to hear. He died on December 9, in his chapel before the Blessed Sacrament.

Thomas C. Reeves is a fellow at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute and the author of several books, including A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy. His latest book, America's Bishop, is the definitive biography of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. It is published by Encounter Books.