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Life Is Worth Giving

BISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN: THE PREACHER WHO BECAME A MEDIA STAR

BY Fr. Kevin Shanley

Introduction

The visage and voice of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was known throughout the U.S. and elsewhere during his career as a radio preacher on "The Catholic Hour" in the 1940s, and in the following decades as the media star on "Life is Worth Living" weekly TV show. His viewing and performance on TV earned him an appearance on the cover of the prestigious "Time" Magazine, and an "Emmy" Award as the top media star in the U.S. His great program even outclassed "The Texaco Star Theater" of comedian Milton (Uncle Milty) Berle who graciously acknowledged Bishop Sheen (and his heavenly sponsor) as the top performer on TV.

A Long-ago Memory

As a high school seminarian in 1948-49, this writer vividly recalls the deep and fascinating baritone voice which invited listeners to seek God in all things. Later, on TV, his piercing, deep-set eyes invited all to the same purpose. His TV show was the first religious one on commercial television, sponsored by the Admiral (TV) Corporation, and was soon an overwhelming success.

But who was this priest-turned-media-star? According to some who knew him well, and others, he was was the

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"Beloved Preacher and Teacher of the Word" ~~was~~ a priest deeply devoted to his Faith and to people of all Faiths.

Born and raised in a large Irish Catholic family of share-cropper farmers in El Paso, IL, near Peoria, he was early noted for his piety and ~~his~~ *STUDIOUSNESS.*

On Sept. 20, 1919, Fulton Sheen was ordained to the priesthood. And on that day he established two hallmarks of his priesthood: he resolved to offer the Holy Eucharist each Saturday in honor of the Blessed Mother for her protection of his priesthood; and he also promised to make a Holy Hour each day before the Blessed Sacrament. He kept both resolutions throughout his life.

Following ordination, he was sent to the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he would eventually join the faculty. He also attended the University of Louvain in Belgium from which he received his ¹⁰ doctorate in philosophy in 1923.

When he returned to the Diocese of Peoria, he ^(WAS) ~~was~~ appointed as a lowly parish assistant priest. He plunged into the parish apostolate in the same way he plunged into everything in life: joyfully and wholeheartedly. His outlook in life was that everyone's vocation was to be like Mary, through God's grace, to lovingly and humbly bear Christ within and then usher Him in service to one another.

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After doing parish work and teaching at Catholic University, he began his preaching career on radio and then TV. He was given his own half-hour TV Show entitled "Life is Worth Living" on DuMont TV. The show made its debut on Feb. 12, 1952, for a season of 26 episodes at a cost of \$1 million. His salary of \$26,000 per show was always unhesitatingly handed over each week to the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, as he had resolved to refuse any personal financial reimbursement for his outstanding services. He appeared in his recently acquired bishop's robes..

That same year he was nominated for, and won, TV's prestigious Emmy Award as "Most Outstanding Television Personality."
~~(MOST UNUSALLY.)~~ Bishop Sheen found himself at a loss for words. But with a twinkle in his eye, he announced, "I wish to thank my four writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John."

The Advertising Club of New York also awarded Bishop Sheen the title "Our Television Man of the Year." And in a nationwide poll, "Radio and Television Daily" named him TV's "Man of the Year." And the great American publication, "Look Magazine" recognized "Life is Worth Living" as the best religious program in the U.S. three different times. Bishop Sheen's alma mater, The Catholic University of America, presented him with the Cardinal Gibbons Medal for his service to the Lord, America, and C.U. And in that same year, the Freedom Foundation of Valley Forge in Pennsylvania recognized Bishop Sheen and his program for contributing to the American Way of Life.

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Even his fan mail was beyond expectation with as many as eighteen to twenty-five thousand letters a day arriving!

As director of the mission-fund raising Propagation of the Faith, Bishop Sheen also gave women positions of authority. And as a conciliar bishop at the Second Vatican Council, he regretted that his request for a document about women in the Church and the world did not come to pass. His high esteem for women and his love for the Blessed Mother were tied together. He discovered that the level of any civilization could be measured by the level of its care for women.

Another important aspect of Bishop Sheen's life was his opposition to Communism which he began in the early 1930s. As he pointed out about this evil: "Brotherhood became revolutionary proletariat; sacrifice became violence; and the will of God became the will of the dictator." But his outstanding convert from Communism was "Daily Worker" editor Louis Budenz.

Bishop Sheen was also a personal friend of Pope Pius XII and Pope John XXIII. But as an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of New York, he didn't get along well with Cardinal Francis Spellman, his superior. Not long afterward, Bishop Sheen was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, N.Y., at the age of 71. The transition was not easy for him. He never quite enjoyed the popularity or esteem of the clergy or people of the new diocese, as he had previously on a national scale.

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His opposition to the Vietnam War also created a difficult situation for Bishop Sheen. In addition, his attempts to create affordable housing for minorities lessened his acceptance by his people, and clergy. It was not a happy time in his life but he refused to complain.

It should be remembered of Bishop Sheen that he was far more than a media star. He was above all a priest with a single-minded determination to bring people to God. Although he counted the rich and famous among his converts, he was a friend and benefactor to many poor, sick and lonely people and not a few hardened sinners. As Pope John Paul II said of him, he was "a loyal son of the Church."