

Fulton Sheen Bet on America. Some Catholics Want to Call It Off.

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At the height of then-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's media career in the 1950s, he was probably the most famous, most mainstream, most beloved public Catholic the United States had ever known. Every week, tens of millions of Americans watched his award-winning television show, "Life Is Worth Living," or listened to its radio version. It was a ratings success that remains to this day the most successful religious television program in history.

In a nation of 160 million, it was truly an astonishing achievement. As many as one in five Americans (not just Catholics) tuned in on a regular basis to watch Sheen, serene and winsome in his clerical collar and cape, explain principles of Thomistic philosophy and theology in easy-to-digest ways. Up to this point in American history, many Catholics had a tendency to view the American mainstream as a threat and source of contagion. Sheen charged right into it, sending his message of hope over the airwaves and directly into American living rooms.

He wore his superstar status lightly, however. In 1953, when he beat out television legends like Lucille Ball and Edward R. Murrow at the Emmys for "Most Outstanding Television Personality," he humorously thanked "my four writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John." He converted celebrities like Clare Boothe Luce and Henry Ford II, hobnobbed with politicians and media barons, and raised millions for foreign missions as head of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Sheen wrote the book on what it meant to be a "professional Catholic." Or, if one existed, he threw it out and wrote a better one.

Eventually, though, his star faded. Perhaps more accurately, it was dimmed by internal church politics and grudges. (More on this later.) Sheen finished his life in exile, both from the limelight and from the ecclesiastical hierarchy—first as the bishop of Rochester, N.Y., then in a strangely hermit-like existence in an apartment on Manhattan's Park Avenue.

This was hardly the Lifetime Achievement finish that every influencer craves. But it was fitting in a way, and Sheen recognized that fact. From the start, he had emphasized that the cross stood at the center of Christian faith. He embraced his own as a spiritual purification, a chance to strip away the vanity of celebrity life and give his soul unstintingly back to God. His autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, reflects very beautifully on this theme. "Generally," he wrote, "the more we accept popular estimates, the less time we spend on our knees examining conscience. The outer world becomes so full of limelight as to make us forget the light within."

No doubt the change in visibility and influence was more bearable given that he *did* in fact log plenty of hours in prayer, even throughout the glory years. As a seminarian, Sheen made it a personal rule to devote one hour each day to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. At his ordination, he took a vow to continue this practice, which he kept across his earthly rise and fall, all the way to his death. On Dec. 9, 1979, he collapsed in the small private chapel of his home, where he was eventually found peacefully resting in the presence of the Eucharist that had sustained him across all those decades. Television audiences may be fickle, but God is not.

All-American Catholic

As the church gathers to celebrate his beatification on Sept. 26 in St. Louis, Fulton Sheen should be remembered for many things: his incisive mind, his zeal for evangelism, his deep fidelity to the church. But he should also be remembered for his holiness. Given the distractions and temptations of celebrity life, we cannot doubt that it was hard-won. In fact, the witness of his life was his final and most important lecture for the nation he had once held spellbound on Tuesday nights. Sheen wanted American Catholics to deepen their faith, infusing more soul into the remarkable infrastructure they had built. If they could do that, he believed, the American Catholic Church could have a transformative impact on both the nation and the global church.

It could still happen. We are living in a pivotal moment for American Catholicism. We have the opportunity today to embrace the vision that Sheen saw, in company with men like Archbishop John Ireland and John Courtney Murray, S.J. These men lived in eras when many Catholics, even or perhaps especially in the church's hierarchy, saw America's Protestant roots and democratic political structure as an obstacle to forging a healthy Catholic culture. They took a different view.

Though the United States has never been a majority-Catholic country, men like Ireland, Murray and Sheen believed that its history and political traditions had created fertile soil for growing an authentically Catholic culture. Catholicism, they argued, *did* fit harmoniously into the American tradition, and as prejudices against it faded, they felt Catholics would be better positioned to help an already great nation realize its full potential. At the same time, America could provide a model for the rest of the world of a thriving Christian culture *not* built on an Old World, crown-and-altar foundation. The United States could show people that a modern, free, nation was not in opposition to Christian values.

It was a hard sell for Ireland to make in the 1890s, and later for Murray to make in the 1950s. It took the church some time to come to grips with the idea that free societies might actually be *good* for the faith. Today that view is widely accepted within the global church, and despite the tensions of our current political climate, many still look to the United States for global leadership. But in a strange irony, some American Catholics have now rejected their own nation's nonsectarian, pluralist political tradition, even as the wider church has come to welcome it. Roiling with culture war angst, some Catholic Americans are beginning to doubt the value of our constitutional political tradition and a culture that celebrates freedom.

It is easy enough to understand how this happened. Our political sphere is unlovely at the present moment. Our culture seems to be floundering, not confident and creative

but dissipated and decadent. Witnessing the behavior of our political leaders, we may at times feel deep humiliation, especially given their outsized global influence. This feels like a nation in decline, not a rising power set to lead and evangelize the world.

For Catholics in particular, the disappointment and shame of these recent experiences may tempt us to fall back on a more pessimistic view of our own history and political traditions. We still have, embedded in our cultural memory, resources to draw on in taking a more aggressively rejectionist view of liberal modernity. Young Catholics are refamiliarizing themselves with *Unam Sanctam*, the *Syllabus of Errors*, and the work of integralist thinkers like Charles Maurras. Some now seem convinced that the European critics of yesteryear saw the matter rightly and that liberalism has failed. Maybe it is not such a blessing to live in the land of the free if that freedom leaves us lost in a grey, meaningless secular world.

Sheen's perspective gives us hope. From childhood, he was always proud to be an American. Growing up in a devout family in El Paso, Ill., and then Peoria, he was viewed by his Catholic community as a likely priest. In 1917 he entered St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., just 23 years after Archbishop Ireland first founded it, and imbibed Ireland's optimistic vision of America together with extensive instruction in Thomism.

Sheen had a sharp, philosophical mind and a wide-ranging curiosity about the world. That served him well as he moved to the University of Louvain in Belgium, becoming in 1923 the first American to win the prestigious Cardinal Mercier Prize for philosophy. But his time in Europe also gave him a firsthand look at the political ideologies that were beginning to tear the Old World apart. Modernity's destructive philosophies—Marxism, fascism, nihilism—were rapidly gaining strength in Europe, feeding dangerous nationalistic currents and raising the grim prospect of another catastrophic war. Sheen returned to his own country with a keen appreciation for what Europe had to offer but also a clearer sense of the many ways in which Americans were richly blessed.

Radio Star

As Sheen's scholarly reputation grew, his bishop in Peoria became worried that the attention might turn the young priest into a megalomaniac. Recalled to the Midwest, he cheerfully laid aside his scholarly work and ministered to the poor for several months, until the bishop finally relented and allowed the Catholic University of America to have him as a faculty member. He taught philosophy and theology but also won a reputation as a spectacular public speaker and homilist.

In 1930, NBC and the National Council of Catholic Men together launched a radio program, "The Catholic Hour," meant to deepen listeners' understanding of the Catholic faith. Sheen was invited to host it. He would spend the next two decades still working as a professor at the Catholic University of America, while also starring on his radio show as his ratings steadily climbed.

Sheen was not the only famous American radio priest through the 1930s, as fascism reached full strength and the world prepared for war. "The Catholic Hour" was originally started in part to counter the impact of the antisemitic Father Charles Coughlin, host of the dubiously titled "Golden Hour," which drew in millions with his furious indictments of "predatory capitalism" and a state controlled by nefarious elites who refused to enact

“social justice.” Coughlin openly sympathized with European fascists, recommending a corporatist state similar to that of Benito Mussolini in Italy. When he became openly paranoid about what he described as “World Jewry” and its supposed grip on the global economy, he was eventually forced off the air. He represented a dark foil for Sheen as the two developed their competing visions for American life.

Sheen understood that communism and fascism were not just political theories but also political religions. The aggressive modern state was properly viewed not as the church’s assistant, nor its ally, but as its competitor. Writing in **America** in 1941, he noted that for all of the dismissals of religion by Marx, Lenin and their successors, the Soviet Union had not succeeded in marginalizing the faith; rather, it remained the greatest competitor to the communist movement:

If religion were only a conglomeration of external rites of Byzantine origin, supported by the imperial government, or if it were an opium of the capitalistic regime, then, certainly, twenty-four years after the government was suppressed and capitalism exiled, there should be no religion. That there is, on the admission of the atheists themselves, proves that man is incurably religious, and that as a king in exile, he is wandering, or stumbling, searching or driving back again to this Paradise lost.

Fulton Sheen writing for **America** in 1941

Anticipating the work of Eric Voegelin, he told his listeners that statism was the defining heresy of the 20th century. By contrast, he saw in the American tradition a framework for opposing that evil more successfully than European Catholics had done.

Like Murray, he was attentive to the way that the Declaration of Independence celebrated our establishment under God, “endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” He understood at the same time that a free society faced grave dangers of its own, particularly if liberty were permitted to devolve into license, an empty insistence that every person should be permitted to do as he or she pleased. True freedom, he insisted, involves the embrace of the Cross. Only by submitting to God can we tame our worst impulses and rediscover ourselves.

“The conflict of the future,” Sheen wrote in *Communism and the Conscience of the West*, “is between the absolute who is the God-man and the absolute which is the man-god; between the God who became man and the man who makes himself God; between brothers in Christ and comrades in anti-Christ.”

At its height, “The Catholic Hour” had an estimated four million listeners, with Sheen receiving thousands of letters every week. He continued to preach on the evils of communism even in the early 1940s, when the Roosevelt administration, his radio sponsors and Catholic University colleagues were all pressing him to stop. With the Soviet Union as an ally in World War II, many Americans felt it was inappropriate to treat communism and fascism as “twin evils.” He largely refused to compromise, presenting totalitarianism as a grave spiritual threat that transcended the strategic calculations of the moment.

Reality TV

In 1950, Pope Pius XII sent Sheen to New York City to run the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. He was made an auxiliary bishop of New York, somewhat to the discomfiture of the city's dominant ecclesial figure, Cardinal Francis Spellman. Already a national celebrity, Sheen was soon approached by television executives, and just two years after his arrival in the city, "Life is Worth Living" first aired. Its launch was a bit wobbly, with guffaws echoing loudly across the entertainment industry. The cash-strapped DuMont Television Network put him on Tuesdays at 8 p.m., competing against the wildly popular Milton Berle on NBC and Frank Sinatra on CBS. Failure was the expected outcome. DuMont could not afford anyone with a realistic hope of competing with those top-notch programs, so they opted instead for a prayer.

It was the age of variety shows, but Sheen made no attempt to sing, dance or juggle. There were no special effects or famous guests. His set, designed by a Sheen convert, Jo Mielziner, was extremely simple, resembling the classroom of a Catholic school. There was a chalkboard, a desk, a few chairs, and a statue of the Virgin and Child. Sheen would show up in episcopal regalia, stride to the center of the room and deliver a philosophy lecture. He spoke for 27 minutes and 20 seconds, with no notes or teleprompter, and always concluded on time.

In a matter of weeks he was drawing millions of viewers, startling television insiders with its size and leading Berle to joke good-naturedly, "At least I'm losing my ratings to God!"

It is hard to imagine a more resounding confirmation of Sheen's optimistic vision. His program was no garden-variety televangelism, but serious theological instruction. Sheen was endearing, of course. He told jokes, offered relatable examples and always concluded with his signature phrase "God love you." He made the Gospel relatable to ordinary people. In so doing, though, he powerfully demonstrated that Thomism, communicated in the right way, was in fact the perfect language for expressing the American spirit. The language of the church was entirely suitable for addressing and impressing the American people.

Impeccably orthodox and deeply faithful, Sheen showed Americans how the Catholic faith could provide answers to their deepest questions. He knew that modern people were hungry for meaning, a void the political religions had filled in horrific and dehumanizing ways. In place of that horror, he offered a much better solution: a voluntary embrace of the teachings, moral discipline and graces of the church. Properly understood, freedom and faith were allies, not competitors.

It is bitterly ironic, but in a way oddly appropriate, that Sheen was never rejected by his American audiences, nor by the Hollywood elite. It was the institutional church that canceled him. He ended up drawing the ire of Cardinal Spellman, his ecclesial superior, in a tussle over money. Spellman wanted Sheen to divert funds from his Society for the Propagation of the Faith for diocesan uses. Sheen thought this was inappropriate and ended up taking the dispute all the way to the Vatican. He won his case, and Spellman never forgave him. Sheen was effectively exiled to the Diocese of Rochester, N.Y., in the 1960s; this was a death sentence for his media career.

Ill-suited to administration, he resigned in just a few years, and spent the rest of his life in a kind of personal exile, living quietly in a New York apartment and devoting himself largely to prayer.

His Greatest Lessons

Though he loved the American church deeply, Sheen always insisted that its greatest weaknesses were spiritual. American Catholics had shown striking fortitude in building up a rich network of parishes, schools, hospitals and other institutions without the help of the state. Sheen loved that. But where were the prophets, mystics and saints? Was there enough *spirit* within this remarkable body?

He understood that this was a young country; perhaps in time those figures would emerge in greater numbers. But he also recognized the danger that they might not. Although Sheen certainly broached political topics, he was ever eager to encourage his viewers and listeners to allow the faith to transform their lives: cultivate moral disciplines, drink in the beauty of liturgy and iconography, embrace the suffering of the Cross.

As they contemplate the road ahead, American Catholics should seriously revisit this critique. Clearly, we have excelled as institution builders. Hospitals and schools are certainly important, but they alone will not sustain us if our faith has no depth. As America's culture wars become heated, and we Catholics again face the prospect of ridicule and marginalization, the temptation to despair becomes palpable, and apocalyptic theories rise out of the grass. Right now, a new generation of anti-modern critics has emerged, arguing that the American experiment is fatally flawed and that freedom is inimical to the faith.

That certainly was not Sheen's view. It is also a deeply pessimistic view. How could a crown-and-altar style Catholicism be peacefully instantiated in a nation that has never had a king or a Catholic majority? What will it mean for our descendants, our compatriots and ultimately the church as a whole if we accept that freedom is an enemy of Catholicism and give up on our own tradition and legacy?

Sheen, through his public ministry, pushed the ideas of Ireland and Murray into the mainstream, arguing eloquently that a free and Christian society was the primary alternative to totalitarianism. Nothing that has happened in the intervening decades has made that view any less reasonable. If free societies are not fertile ground for nourishing the faith, what other options do we have?

There is, however, an alternative to rejecting the American tradition that Sheen so skillfully expounded. We could learn to see the defects of our politics and culture, and the anxieties and humiliations that attend them, as our chastening. This could be our spiritual purification. By humbling ourselves, and accepting a measure of suffering and self-sacrifice, it may be possible to season our nation's immense gifts with the graces and devotions of our Catholic faith. If we could do that, we might be allowed the honor of serving our compatriots, and the global church, in the spirit of this great American evangelizer.